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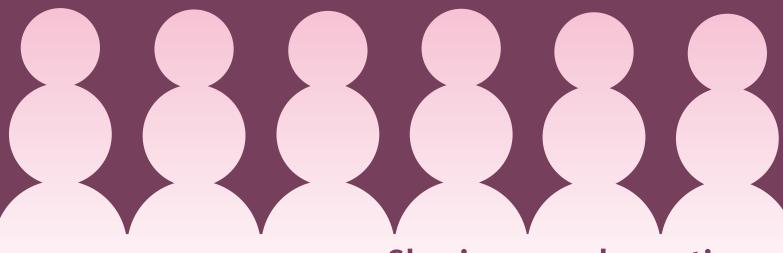
Outcomes from institutional audit

Institutions' intentions for enhancement

Second series

Sharing good practice

Summary

It is clear from the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 that, in general, institutions are aware of the need to articulate and develop their intentions for enhancement. It is, however, noticeable that the term 'enhancement' is used with a number of different meanings, ranging from simple 'improvement' to a more technical sense involving the deliberate and systematic improvement of learning opportunities for students.

A substantial number of audit reports note explicit statements made in institutions' self-evaluation documents to the effect that enhancement is 'assurance-led', implying that enhancement emerges from routine quality assurance activities and cultures. However, audit teams point to the limitations of this approach where institutions are not effective in identifying generic issues emerging from those quality assurance procedures.

A significant proportion of institutions link their approach to enhancement to institutional strategic plans, and more specifically to learning and teaching strategies, which are often seen as incorporating enhancement goals. The relevant audit reports note the associated attainments, but also point to the need for such strategies to be genuinely embedded in institutional practice.

A few institutions explicitly, and several more implicitly, identify their approach to, or their ambitions for, quality as being 'enhancement-led'. What this might mean in practice is not spelled out, but clearly involves an aspiration towards a more integrated, future-focused, and systematic approach to quality management. There is evidence that a number of institutions were beginning to address emerging national agendas about the role of enhancement in quality management, but at the time of audit this was at an early stage of development.

The approach adopted by some institutions would appear to consist of the identification of a collection of individual, detailed initiatives not supported by a clear overall rationale. In these institutions, there is an abundance of broadly defined enhancement activities in train, each of which has an impact, but the initiatives are not necessarily integrated in a systematic and planned manner at institutional level.

The audit reports reveal a cluster of recommendations and critical comments centring on the conclusion that the institutions in question had not, at the time of audit, developed a strategic approach to quality enhancement. Auditors often noted examples of good practice, and sometimes pointed to the potential for enhancement, but overall they came to the conclusion that activity needed to be systematically exploited via the development of an enhancement strategy.

Thus, institutions covered by the audits undertaken between December 2004 and August 2006 adopted approaches to enhancement which can be placed on a spectrum; this ranges from the encouragement of multiple, often local initiatives, with the potential to enhance aspects of provision, through to the development of definitive enhancement strategies linked to an institution's strategic or corporate plan.

The audit reports convey a sense of institutions working to establish a coherent, institutional approach to enhancement in the context of a re-evaluation of the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement across the UK higher education sector.

Overall, there is confirmation in the audit reports of a clear commitment by institutions to enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities; however, the method by which this was achieved, and the extent to which it was being managed systematically and deliberately, varied.

Preface

An objective of institutional audit is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high-quality in teaching and learning'. To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of its institutional audits, QAA produces short working papers describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the audit reports. Since 2005 these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit (Outcomes...)*. The first series of these papers drew on the findings of the audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004. This paper is based on the findings of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006.

A feature of good practice in institutional audit is considered to be a process, a practice, or a way of handling matters which, *in the context of the particular institution*, is improving, or leading to the improvement of, the management of quality and/or academic standards, and learning and teaching. *Outcomes...* papers are intended to provide readers with pointers to where features of good practice relating to particular topics can be located in the published audit reports. Each *Outcomes...* paper, therefore, identifies the features of good practice in individual reports associated with the particular topic, and their location in the main report. Although all features of good practice are listed, in the interests of brevity not all are discussed in this paper. In the initial listing in paragraph 10, the first reference is to the numbered or bulleted lists of features of good practice at the end of each institutional audit report, the second is to the relevant paragraph in Section 2 of the main report. Throughout the body of this paper references to features of good practice in the institutional audit reports give the institution's name and the number from Section 2 of the main report.

It should be emphasised that the features of good practice mentioned in this paper should be considered in their proper institutional context, and that each is perhaps best viewed as a stimulus for reflection and further development, rather than as a model for emulation. A note on the topics identified for the first and second series of *Outcomes...* papers can be found in Appendix 3 (page 20).

As noted above, this second series of *Outcomes...* papers is based on the 59 institutional audit reports published by August 2006, and the titles of the papers are, in most cases, the same as their counterparts in the first series. Like the first series of *Outcomes...* papers, those in the second series are perhaps best seen as 'works in progress'. Although QAA retains copyright of the contents of the *Outcomes...* papers, they can be freely downloaded from the QAA website and cited with acknowledgement.

Introduction and general overview

1   This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 as they relate to 'institutions' intentions for enhancement' (see Appendix 1, page 16). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in the second *Outcomes…* series can be found in Appendix 4 (page 22).

2   As part of the transitional audit process between 2003 and 2006, institutions in England and Northern Ireland were asked to provide a self-evaluation document to 'set the context for the audit'. The indicative guidance for the self-evaluation invited the institution, among other things, to 'describe and discuss its intended strategy for the next three years to further enhance practice and remedy any shortcomings it has identified [for itself]' (*Handbook for institutional audit: England*, 2002, page 33). This provided the starting point for enquiries written up in the main section of the audit report under the subheading: 'The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards'. Additionally, the template for the audit reports prompted audit teams to summarise the institution's 'future plans for enhancement', and to evaluate the plans based on what they had read elsewhere in the self-evaluation document, and what they had learned from meetings with members of staff and students.

3   The material for this paper was drawn from the sections in the audit reports on 'the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards', but also from other sections where audit teams commented on institutional strategies and initiatives which were oriented in some way to enhancement, however defined.

4   There are references to institutions' approaches to the enhancement of quality and standards in each of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006. As might be expected, the nature and volume of the discussion in each report varies considerably - from single paragraphs in 16 reports to more than 10 paragraphs in five reports; however, the majority of reports devoted four or five paragraphs to the topic. Features of good practice are identified in more than one quarter of the reports, some of which relate to particular instances of enhancement addressed in more detail elsewhere in the relevant report. There are recommendations to institutions regarding enhancement in about one third of the reports, with advice not linked to formal recommendations in several more.

5   The profile of 'enhancement' in the 2004-06 audit reports is arguably higher than in those published in the period 2002-04. This is, in part, because of the debates generated across the sector by QAA's publication, in advance of the second tranche of audits, of the definition of 'enhancement' to be used by audit teams: 'the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'. Interest in the topic had been further raised by the development (since 2001) of the Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) process in Scottish higher education institutions. It is for this reason that the present paper was commissioned as part of the second series of *Outcomes...* papers - there is no corresponding paper in the first series.

6   Guidance to institutions asked them to describe and discuss their intended strategy for the next three years to further enhance practice and to summarise future plans for enhancement; however, this definition of enhancement as strategic and planned was slightly blurred as regards how the term was actually used in reports. A review of all the audit reports suggests that auditors use the term 'enhancement' in at least three broad ways. First, the term is sometimes used by teams simply as a synonym for 'improve' when identifying good practice [see, for example, London South Bank University, paragraph 200 (second bullet point); paragraphs 67, 101, 102 and 103; and University of the West of England, Bristol, paragraph 257 (i); paragraphs 90 to 92]; accordingly, one further report refers to the 'enhancement of learning support resources' [University of Sunderland, paragraph 206 (iii); paragraphs 101-104]. A similar usage is sometimes evident when making recommendations; thus another report recommends the 'enhancement of programme specifications'.

7   Second, some audit reports note as good practice the role of particular, separate initiatives, roles or structures [see, for example, Heythrop College, paragraph 200 (i); paragraph 66; and University College Winchester, paragraph 257 (ii); paragraphs 42, 115, 131, 133 and 134] such as a committee, or staff development opportunities, in enhancing aspects of quality and standards. Here the emphasis is on specific initiatives which individually have the capacity to enhance quality, rather than on an institutional, strategic approach.

8   Third, and most closely reflecting QAA's definition, the term is used in the context of an overall, institutional strategy for quality enhancement. Implicitly and explicitly, the reports make a distinction between individual examples of good practice within institutions, and the means by which institutions seek to systematically and deliberately improve the quality of learning opportunities for students. This reflects the debates mentioned above about the role of enhancement in quality management, and the discussions about the future shape of institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland. For example, one audit report specifically noted that an institution 'had yet to engage with the development of approaches to enhancement seen in the wider sector, which were placing increasing emphasis on enhancement alongside assurance and on more future focused and enhancement-led approaches'. As a result, the report concluded that it would be desirable for the institution to consider the development of an enhancement-led approach to quality management. The themes explored later in this paper focus on the extent to which, and the means whereby, institutions whose audit reports were published between December 2004 and August 2006 were addressing institutional approaches to quality enhancement.

9   It is probably useful, then, to note the sense, evident in the audit reports, of a transitional period during which understandings of quality assurance, and especially quality enhancement, were being critically evaluated across the sector in the UK. Perhaps understandably, the different ways in which institutions engaged with this broad debate are apparent in the body of reports.

Features of good practice

10   The institutional audit reports identified a large number of features of good practice which reference enhancement. To a large extent, they reflect the three usages of the word 'enhancement' identified in paragraphs 6-8; the list below has therefore been classified accordingly, though the use of this classification is naturally subjective and the classification is not intended to give a definitive analysis of approaches to enhancement.

Specific examples of improvement to particular aspects of the student experience, learning and teaching and the academic environment:

- the widespread use of the University's research environment and links with industry to enhance the quality of learning opportunities [Cranfield University, paragraph 196 (iv); paragraph 94]

- the empowerment of students to identify and enhance their skills through embedding the Core Skills Policy in the curriculum and developing a set of effective, innovative and attractive personal development planning materials [London South Bank University, paragraph 200 (second bullet point); paragraphs 67, 101, 102 and 103]

- maintenance and enhancement of learning support resources as a key priority, and the provision of high-quality technician support [University of Sunderland, 206 (iii); paragraphs 101-104]

- the University's commitment to enhance further its student support services [University of the West of England, Bristol, paragraph 257 (i); paragraphs 90 to 92]

- institutional support for visiting lecturers and the resulting enhancement of the student experience [University of the West of England, Bristol, paragraph 257 (iii); paragraph 94]

- the work of the Research and Knowledge Transfer Centre, especially in its support for postgraduate research students and in the enhancement of a postgraduate research culture [University College Winchester, paragraph 257 (ii); paragraphs 42, 115, 131, 133 and 134]

- the role of senior students in induction and in enhancing the resident student experience [University College Winchester, paragraph 257 (v); paragraph 138].

Distinct initiatives, roles or structures which contribute to enhancement

- the proactive use of externality in the enhancement of the student experience and of the quality of the provision [City University, paragraph 320 (ii); paragraphs 65 and 155]

- the work of the Educational Development Centre, which provides wide-ranging support for the enhancement of academic practice in the promotion of learning, and which draws on expertise from across the institution [City University, paragraph 320 (iii); paragraph 111]

- teaching awards, which serve as an enhancement tool to promote and disseminate good practice across the University [The Queen's University Belfast, paragraph 260 (first bullet point); paragraph 40]

- the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching, which it makes available to all staff of the University, including part-time staff, and its potential for enhancement [The Queen's University Belfast, paragraph 260 (fourth bullet point); paragraphs 99 and 102]

- the commitment and proactive contribution of members of institutional and departmental support staff to the enhancement of the student experience [Goldsmith's College, University of London, paragraph 213 (ii); paragraph 33]

- the proactive way in which faculty assistant registrars support the academic management of faculty activity, and their contribution to quality enhancement across the College [Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London, paragraph 215 (iii); paragraphs 35 and 91]

- the enhancement of the student experience by extensive external input into programmes across the University [Kingston University, paragraph 237 (ii); paragraphs 51, 80, 127 and 164]

- the University's active engagement in pedagogic research, and the contribution this makes to the enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching [London Metropolitan University, paragraph 188 (i); paragraph 33]

- the engagement of schools and central departments in sharing good practice across the institution, especially the work of the Enhancement Groups [University of Northumbria at Newcastle, paragraph 254 (ii); paragraphs 33 and 34]

- the identification of, and staff development provided for, personnel who have a key role to play in supporting the devolution of the quality assurance and enhancement agenda as quality leaders, and as leaders in learning and teaching [University of East London, paragraph 256 (ii); paragraphs 38 and 56]

- the development of the role of Learning and Teaching Coordinator, and their effective integration into University College processes for the enhancement of quality [University College Winchester, paragraph 257 (iii); paragraph 101]

- the composite report of issues raised by external examiners, considered by Academic Board, as an effective vehicle for developing opportunities for enhancement [Heythrop College, paragraph 200 (i); paragraph 66]

- the leadership and support for teaching and learning, including a focus on enhancement activity, provided by the Educational Development Unit [Thames Valley University, paragraph 253 (ii); paragraph 95]

- the high level of collaborative commitment of academic and support staff to the achievement of the College's aims, leading to the enhancement of the student experience [Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies, paragraph 229 (iv); paragraph 121].

Institutional strategies for quality enhancement

- the institution of an influential committee dedicated to enhancing the student experience, with direct access to the Board of Governors and the Academic Board [London South Bank University, paragraph 200 (third bullet point); paragraph 74]

- the culture of enhancement with, for example, benchmarking of the University College performance, the work of the School of Continuing Professional Education, and the extensive uptake of staff development opportunities [Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, paragraph 238 (iv); paragraphs 36, 82, 92, 96, 198, 207 and 235]

- the responsive, and simultaneously strategic, role of Educational and Staff Development in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning across the institution [Queen Mary, University of London, paragraph 245 (third bullet point), paragraphs 114, 122 and 127]

- the effectiveness of the student on-line evaluation system, SOLE, which has the potential to contribute to quality assurance and enhancement. The audit team noted, in particular, the engagement of students with the process and the use of results in the Personal Review and Development Planning and promotion processes [Imperial College London, paragraph 302 (ii); paragraphs 96, 103, and 112].

Themes

11   A consideration of the features of good practice and recommendations in the institutional audit reports which relate to institutions' intentions for enhancement suggests that a number of broad themes merit further discussion. Each of these relates, in some way, to the **overall** institutional approach taken to enhancement as revealed by the audit reports. Consequently, this commentary, while it does consider individual kinds of enhancement activity, focuses on the definition discussed in paragraph 5. The focus, then, is on institutions' intentions for enhancement in a **strategic** sense, as suggested by the guidance in the *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002). Broadly speaking, it is possible to define a spectrum along which institutions can be placed in terms of their development of an enhancement strategy; at one end are those institutions that have defined enhancement in terms of a plethora of individual, locally generated initiatives, and at the other end are institutions which define their approach to quality management as led by a deliberate and systematic enhancement plan at institutional level. The themes to be explored, as laid out here, address different points on that spectrum, and are as follows:

- 'Assurance-led' approaches to enhancement
- Enhancement in the context of strategic plans and learning and teaching strategies
- Enhancement-led approaches
- Sporadic development of initiatives
- The need for an enhancement strategy.

'Assurance-led' approaches to enhancement

12   A substantial number of the audit reports note explicit statements to the effect that enhancement is 'assurance-led', indicating that enhancement emerges from routine quality assurance activities and cultures. For example, one report states that the institution 'regards enhancement as a process of continuous improvement embedded in a strong culture of review and evaluation', while enhancement in another institution is characterised by the relevant audit report as drawing 'actively on the outcomes of...internal monitoring and review processes in the broadest terms'. A third report commented on the relevant institution's approach, which focused on the 'further embedding of [quality and standards management and enhancement] at corporate and faculty levels...to achieve greater consistency across the institution'. Even where institutions did not make an explicit claim to having an assurance-led approach, a number of reports point to various internal quality assurance activities - for example, periodic reviews, thematic reviews, and service reviews - which were individually and routinely leading to enhancement. Relatedly, a number of reports note institutions' increased awareness of the need for effective dissemination of good practice, with self-evaluation documents pointing to the role of various initiatives, including: specific appointments; designated committees; specific units for development of learning and teaching; staff development and educational technology; and, in one case, a local Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. In some cases, such initiatives led to the identification of good practice, one example of which is 'the institution of an influential committee dedicated to enhancing the student experience' [London South Bank University, paragraph 74].

13   In this context, several reports suggested that institutions needed to 'go further'. One recorded the institution's acknowledgement that 'a need to strengthen quality assurance remains', with the audit team confirming that the institution was 'yet to exploit to the full the information it is gathering in processes such as internal review and external examiner reports', while another observed an institution's plans to 'capitalise on...operation of its key quality assurance procedures'. In a few instances, audit teams noted uncertainty as to whether such approaches, as they presently operated, could lead to enhancement, with one report querying whether the institution 'was co-ordinating and sharing information between the individual programmes', and therefore 'to what extent the University's present and future approach to quality and academic standards management would be shaped by enhancement'.

14   Elsewhere, there is reference in a significant number of reports to various quality-related activities which, in the audit team's judgement, have the potential to enhance. One report points to 'a range of initiatives that might be anticipated to have enhancement intentions', and another to a host of 'locally generated enhancement initiatives'. In general, then, the picture is one where various initiatives founded in quality assurance are in train; as such, they offer the possibility for a more strategic approach to enhancement, but are not always being utilised in a systematic manner.

15   It is probably unsurprising that a number of institutions seek to approach quality enhancement through the systematic exploitation of perspectives or information gained from their existing internal quality assurance arrangements. Enhancement is, in effect, designed to emerge from what one report called 'normal business.' However, audit teams point to the limitations of this approach where institutions are not effective in building on generic issues emerging from those quality assurance procedures.

Enhancement in the context of strategic plans and learning and teaching strategies

16   In a significant proportion of audit reports, it is evident that institutions tie their approach to enhancement to various forms of existing institutional strategy. In some cases, an overarching strategic plan is seen as incorporating enhancement goals, and as being implemented via supporting strategies. In others, institutions anchor their approach to enhancement specifically to their learning and teaching strategy.

17   A number of institutions make the claim that enhancement is embedded in strategic or corporate plans. One audit report records that the 'Strategic Plan sets out a series of aspirations for quality enhancement'. A second report, suggesting more of an ongoing strategy, reports on an institution's 'further work on those Corporate Plan Implementation Plan (CPIP) projects which focus specifically on the quality of the student learning experience'. In a few cases, audit reports note specific linkages to relevant supporting strategies, including learning and teaching strategies. For example, one report recorded that the institution had 'developed a range of strategies focusing on and complementing its Corporate Plan objectives', whilst another noted that the institution's 'Strategic Development Plan emphasises its commitment, among other things, to enhancing all aspects of the quality of the student experience' and achieves its objectives via 'a set of key and supporting strategies'. However, it should be noted that, in this instance, the audit team concluded that these strategies were 'aspirational' and 'in general lacking sufficient specificity of outcomes and targets to permit precise monitoring' (see also paragraph 25 on the use of statistical management information data), two features echoed in relation to other broad enhancement approaches.

18   A significant number of reports note the way intentions for enhancement are attached in part, or in some cases wholly, to institutional learning, teaching and assessment strategies; for example, one institution claims that its Learning and Teaching Strategy puts enhancement 'at its heart'. One report records that an institution saw its learning and teaching strategy 'as a means by which [it had] articulated its intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards', while another institution was reported as viewing its version as the 'key instrument for identifying and sharing specific quality enhancement initiatives'. Several reports described common features, including: defined sub-strategies at department and faculty level, senior leadership of the strategy, and clearly devolved responsibilities. One report pointed to the role of associate deans as 'pivotal' in taking strategy forward, while in another case the 'proactive' role of faculty assistant registrars was deemed to be a feature of good practice [Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London, paragraphs 35 and 91]. In several reports, the role of designated committees

in taking an oversight was mentioned as particularly significant, with one Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee being described as occupying 'a nodal position', bringing together various groups and liaising between the institution and its faculties.

19   According to the self-evaluation documents, the aims of the strategies are diverse. They include: dissemination of good practice; pedagogic research on learning and teaching in higher education; the development and maintenance of academic programmes designed to improve learning and teaching; professional development of staff; quality audits; and developing links with learning and teaching networks. Some also single out the aim of developing related or separate e-learning strategies, usually with the implicit implementation or revision of virtual learning environments, as a further arm of enhancement.

20   It is difficult to judge how far institutions addressed the institutional audit question about enhancement by drawing on pre-existing learning and teaching strategies, and how far the strategies were originally developed with a view to promoting enhancement. What is clearer is that audit reports are relatively silent with regard to the extent to which learning and teaching strategies are achieving their enhancement aims. The report which noted the institution's 'intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards were carefully planned, appropriate in the context of its mission and vision, effectively communicated, and supported by a strong management commitment' is unusual. In a further case, the audit team was convinced that 'there was general institutional ownership of the [resulting] enhancement strategy.' Other reports, in contrast, note the potential for future benefits, referring to the opportunity for 'further progress' and the 'prospective' effects of an initiative, while in one report it is observed that the strategy in question 'was not yet familiar to all [staff] met by the team during the audit visit'. However, on the whole, the relevant audit reports are fairly cautious as to the effectiveness of learning and teaching strategies as vehicles of enhancement, noting attainment but also pointing to the value of their being institutionally embedded.

Enhancement-led approaches

21   Given the close interest expressed by institutions in England and Northern Ireland in the enhancement-led approach developed in Scotland since 2001, it is perhaps surprising to find only a few audit reports identifying institutional approaches to quality as 'enhancement-led'. Only three of the 59 institutional audit reports covered by the present paper use the term 'enhancement-led' to describe the relevant institution's approach to quality, and in each case they contain little information on what the institutions considered this might mean in practice. In one report, however, citing the self-evaluation document, it was stated that the institution's 'enhancement-led approach to learning and teaching will include a commitment to the professional development of the teacher; strengthening and diversifying the learning environment; an increasing emphasis on transferable skills and employability; and increasing the effectiveness of support services for its diverse student population'.

22   What is noticeable here, as in the other two reports which cite an enhancement-led approach, is that, at the time of audit, the institutions were signalling an intention to move further towards this model by bringing together various facets of quality assurance previously undertaken separately. These include the work of educational

development teams and university committees, and events including an annual teaching conference. This sense that institutions aspire to move towards a more integrated approach is perhaps, as noted previously, reflective of the developing interest in quality enhancement between December 2004 and August 2006.

23   On occasions, audit teams drew attention to institutional approaches which, despite not being labelled as enhancement-led, constituted strategies for general enhancement of academic quality. Thus, one institution's enhancement strategy was 'based on continuous improvement and devolved authority within a strategic vision and plan'. In another report, the team noted that the institution 'undertook extensive monitoring of its performance in relation to externally and internally set benchmarks and used this information to seek improvements.' This allowed the team to conclude that there was 'a proactive culture of enhancement, shared widely within the institution' which constituted a feature of good practice [Buckinghamshire Chilterns, paragraphs 36, 40, 63, 64, 82, 87, 108].

24   However, in some cases, there was a clear sense that institutions had only recently developed their strategies. Three institutions had just restructured to give a specific office responsibility for enhancement; one had appointed a member of staff to help in 'securing the co-operation of key players within (the institution)' with regard to enhancement aims, while another had created a Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. One had recently adopted 'an enhancement driven programme development and approval process', and had appointed both a Head of Teaching Quality Enhancement and a number of faculty sub-deans responsible for quality enhancement. Within reports there is mention of 'plans' and 'steps being taken'; of 'intentions'; of the identification of strategic enhancement aims; of 'proposals'; and of increasing engagement with enhancement. Again, the reports convey a sense that institutions had become aware of the wider debates about quality management current at the time.

25   Interestingly, in the light of these debates, the audit reports say comparatively little about the use of statistical management information in demonstrating outcomes of enhancement strategies. A few do recognise the significance (and some difficulties) of using data to assess impact. One report specified the goal of 'more systematic production and use of data', and another indicated that its plans for enhancement included 'greater accessibility and timeliness of data'. In a further instance, an audit team noted the institution's 'development of its electronic communications and data systems as providing the base needed for the future development of a more strategic approach to quality enhancement'. Yet on the whole, audit teams make minimal comment about the role of management information in enabling institutions to assess the effectiveness of a more strategic and systematic approach to enhancement. This conclusion aligns with the more general observations about the relatively underdeveloped use of management information in many institutions which are made in the series 2 paper *Progression and completion statistics.*

26   The picture, then, is one in which a number of institutions are beginning to address emerging national agendas about the role of enhancement in quality management, but are at an early stage of development; in this context, one audit team understandably concluded that it was simply 'too early' for it to form a judgement about the institution's strategy.

Sporadic development of initiatives

27   It is noteworthy that many of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 identify institutional approaches to quality enhancement which appear to consist of the identification of a collection of individual, specific initiatives without a clear underpinning rationale. On occasions, audit teams specifically comment on this; for example, one report noted that the institution 'identified a wide range of recent and/or ongoing changes/developments which may articulate with enhancement to quality and standards, but in general it did not highlight their actual or potential impact in that context'. In another report, the audit team 'formed the view that staff saw quality enhancement in terms of specific projects and initiatives, but not as part of an overarching strategy'.

28   In many cases, audit reports list initiatives operative in the institution in question. These initiatives range from what might be described as routine improvements to quality assurance across learning and teaching developments, to revised student support and personal tutoring arrangements and development of particular strategies, for example, those relating to employability and personal development planning (PDP). However, this is by no means an exhaustive list. In several cases, individual initiatives are singled out as features of good practice, with audit teams noting their 'potential' to contribute to enhancement [see, for example, Imperial College London, paragraph 302 (ii) and The Queen's University Belfast, paragraph 260, (fourth bullet point)].

29   Several audit reports include individual enhancements – for example, 'refining the planning process', 'management of student numbers' and 'updating the information and communications technology infrastructure' – which would not necessarily be understood as relating directly to quality or indeed standards. One audit report observed that the relevant institution 'defines enhancement in broad terms to refer to all planned initiatives'. Another, in pointing to some ambiguity around the various institutional initiatives, suggested that the institution in question could be in danger of 'losing some opportunities for enhancement **in the more established sense of academic quality or the student learning experience** (our emphasis).

30   In some cases, audit teams viewed the accumulated effect of initiatives as laudable, as, for example, in one report where the audit team concluded that the institution's plans for enhancement 'reflected both routine and initiative-driven improvements and were related to strategies and framed as targets with specified scales for achievements.' In a couple of instances, however, the multiple initiatives attracted some criticisms, with one report noting that specific enhancement mechanisms were 'used rather variably', and another observing that the 'extent to which...practices derive from local initiatives suggests that there is some way to go' before there is 'a basis for the assured enhancement of the experience of all students'. A third report concludes that despite the institution's success 'in taking forward a number of individual developments...more could be done to think through how good practice and quality enhancement could be systematically and strategically promoted across [the institution]'.

31   The picture, then, is one in which there is clearly an abundance of activities in train which might broadly be classified as enhancement-related - that is, initiatives developed to improve aspects of academic activity. Nevertheless, as the reports indicate, the initiatives are not necessarily integrated in a systematic manner at institutional level. There is a sense that, in these cases, institutions are defining the many improvements and changes underway as constituting an enhancement strategy, either explicitly or by implication. However, the audit reports frequently draw attention to a lack of coherence among the initiatives.

The need for an enhancement strategy

32   It is evident that many institutions had sought, albeit embryonically and in diverse ways, to engage with national debates about enhancement in framing their strategies. However, a clutch of recommendations and critical comments were focused around the conclusion that institutions had not yet developed a strategic approach to quality enhancement. In one case, the audit team concluded that there was 'a lack of strategic planning with regard to enhancement, and an uncertainty on a clear definition'. Another observed that quality enhancement 'can be considered to be an unstructured activity', while a third said that staff in the particular institution 'saw quality enhancement in terms of specific projects but not as part of an overarching strategy'. One symptom noted in such reports was difficulty in communicating and disseminating initiatives and good practice through the institution; one report suggested 'an improved flow of information could enrich further the opportunities for the enhancement of quality and standards'.

33   In cases where an enhancement strategy was not apparent, auditors often noted examples of good practice and sometimes pointed to the potential for enhancement (what one report called 'a considerable level of activity with enhancement potential'). Overall, however, they came to the conclusion that this activity needed to be systematically exploited. This was perhaps exemplified in the report which observed that 'a comprehensively robust and fully inclusive strategy for enhancement has yet to be fully articulated and embedded'.

34   Unsurprisingly, such observations tended to result in the suggestion that institutions should, in plain language, develop an enhancement strategy. One report advised that an institution 'think through how good practice and quality enhancement could be systematically and strategically promoted'; another recommended the development of 'a formal and coordinated quality enhancement strategy' which would 'take a more holistic view of the issues and practices involved'.

35   In one case, an institutional audit report went rather further by noting that 'whilst the [institution] sought to improve the quality of the student learning experience and place particular emphasis on that experience, it had yet to engage with the development of approaches to enhancement seen in the wider sector, which were placing increasing emphasis on enhancement alongside assurance, and on more future focused and enhancement-led approaches'. The report recommended that the institution should 'consider the development of an enhancement-led approach to quality management'. What is especially interesting here is that it is evident that the audit team was working with the definition of enhancement which was emerging

from the discussions about the potential future shape of quality management and, indeed, institutional audit – that is, a definition which was 'future focused', and based on a clear distinction between assurance and enhancement.

Conclusions

36   As the review of the various overall approaches indicates, institutions covered by the audits undertaken between December 2004 and August 2006 adopted different approaches to the prompts set out in the *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002). These approaches can be placed on a spectrum, ranging from the encouragement of multiple and often local initiatives with the potential to enhance aspects of provision, to the development of a definitive enhancement strategy linked to an institution's strategic or corporate plan.

37   Whichever approach was adopted, there is a predominant sense of institutions working to establish a coherent, institutional approach to enhancement within the context of a re-evaluation of the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement across the UK higher education sector. It is evident that some institutions, in establishing future-focused, improvement-oriented enhancement strategies, had engaged with alternative models of quality management, while others were only just beginning begun to take stock of what might be involved in adopting a more strategic approach to the enhancement of various aspects of their activities.

38   In most cases, audit teams found 'room for improvement', whether in terms of encouraging institutions to implement their enhancement strategies, or recommending that institutions take the first step of bringing together uncoordinated initiatives to develop an institutional enhancement strategy. In some instances, it was evident that much work remained to be done; this extended, in a number of cases, to agreeing a definition of what might constitute enhancement and to what it should be applied.

39   However, it is clear that, across the board, institutions in England and Northern Ireland were, at the time of these audits, showing a clear recognition of the need to enhance the quality of students' learning opportunities. The methods by which this was achieved, and the extent to which it was being managed systematically and deliberately, clearly varied, but nevertheless, there is evidence in the audit reports of a general and growing commitment to quality enhancement.

Appendix 1 - The institutional audit reports

Note

In the period covered by these papers, a number of institutions underwent a variety of scrutiny procedures for taught degree-awarding powers, university title and research degree-awarding powers. Reports of the individual scrutiny processes were provided to QAA's Advisory Committee on Degree-Awarding Powers, and its Board of Directors, and formed the basis for advice to the Privy Council on the applications made by the respective institutions.

In most cases, the scrutiny processes also provided information which, in the form of a bespoke report, QAA accepted as the equivalent of an institutional audit report. Only those reports which conform to the general pattern of the institutional audit reports are included in the list below.

2004-05

City University

Cranfield University

University of Hull

University of Leicester

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

University of Nottingham

The Queen's University Belfast

University of Surrey

University of Ulster

Goldsmiths College, University of London

Queen Mary, University of London

Royal Holloway and Bedford New College (Royal Holloway, University of London)

University of London

University College London

Birkbeck College, University of London

Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (Imperial College London)

St George's Hospital Medical School

University of Derby

De Montfort University

University of Gloucestershire

University of Hertfordshire

Sheffield Hallam University

University of Huddersfield

Kingston University

London Metropolitan University

Leeds Metropolitan University

Liverpool John Moores University

University of Luton[1]

University of Northumbria at Newcastle

Oxford Brookes University

University of Plymouth

Staffordshire University

London South Bank University

University of Sunderland

University of Teesside

University of East London

University of the West of England, Bristol

University of Westminster

Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College[2]

Canterbury Christ Church University College[3]

University of Chester

Liverpool Hope University

University College Winchester[4]

[1] Now the University of Bedfordshire
[2] Now Buckinghamshire New University
[3] Now Canterbury Christ Church University
[4] Now the University of Winchester

Henley Management College[5]

Harper Adams University College

Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

American InterContinental University – London

2005-06

University of Manchester

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

University of Bolton

Thames Valley University

University of Central England in Birmingham[6]

University of Worcester

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies[7]

Dartington College of Arts[8]

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

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[5] Now merged with the University of Reading
[6] Now Birmingham City University
[7] Now University College Birmingham
[8] Now part of the University College Falmouth

Appendix 2

Appendix 2 - Reports on specialist institutions

2004-05

Birkbeck College, University of London

Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (Imperial College London)

St George's Hospital Medical School

Henley Management College

Harper Adams University College

Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

American Intercontinental University

2005-06

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Appendix 3 - Titles of *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers, Series 2

In most cases, *Outcomes…* papers will be no longer than 20 sides of A4. Projected titles of *Outcomes…* papers in the second series are listed below in provisional order of publication.

The first series of papers can be found on QAA's website at www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement.

Titles

Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards

Progression and completion statistics

Learning support resources (including virtual learning environments)

Assessment of students

Work-based and placement learning, and employability

Programme monitoring arrangements

Arrangements for international students

Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

Recruitment and admission of students

External examiners and their reports

Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports

Institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education

Institutions' support for e-learning

Specialist institutions

Student representation and feedback

Academic guidance, support and supervision, and personal support and guidance

Staff support and development arrangements

Subject benchmark statements

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Programme specifications

Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degrees programmes

The adoption and use of learning outcomes

Validation and approval of new provision, and its periodic review

The self-evaluation document in institutional audit

The contribution of the student written submission to institutional audit

Institutions' intentions for enhancement

Series 2: concluding overview.

Appendix 4 – Methodology

The analysis of the institutional audit reports uses the headings set out in Annex H of the *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002) to subdivide the Summary, Main report and Findings sections of the audit reports into broad areas. An example from the Main report is: 'The institution's framework for managing quality and standards, including collaborative provision'.

For each published report, the text is taken from the report published on QAA's website and converted to plain text format. The resulting files are checked for accuracy, and coded into sections following the template used to construct the institutional audit reports. In addition, the text of each report is tagged with information providing the date the report was published and some basic characteristics of the institution ('base data'). The reports are then introduced into a qualitative research software package, QSR N6®. The software provides a wide range of tools to support indexing and searching, and allows features of interest to be coded for further investigation.

An audit team's judgements, its identification of features of good practice, and its recommendations appear at two points in an institutional audit report: the Summary and at the end of the Findings. It is only in the latter, however, that cross references to the paragraphs in the Main report are to be found, and it is here that the grounds for identifying a feature of good practice, offering a recommendation and making a judgement are set out. These cross references are used to locate features of good practice and recommendations to the particular sections of the report to which they refer.

Individual *Outcomes…* papers are compiled by QAA staff and experienced institutional auditors. To assist in compiling the papers, reports produced by QSR N6® are made available to authors to provide a broad picture of the overall distribution of features of good practice and recommendations in particular areas as seen by the audit teams.

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