Outcomes from institutional audit
The adoption and use of learning outcomes

Summary

This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of the 70 institutional audit reports for higher education institutions in England, published by November 2004.

The development of an approach to higher education programmes based on learning outcomes precedes the introduction of programme specifications. It is clear, however, that the inclusion of programme specifications as a key element in the Academic Infrastructure has served to embed the use of learning outcomes across UK higher education programmes.

Almost all of the institutional audit reports published by November 2004 explicitly mention learning outcomes (sometimes referred to as intended learning outcomes). Sometimes the reports refer to programme outcomes, sometimes to module/unit outcomes, most often they refer to both). Although only one report cites learning outcomes specifically in the wording of features of good practice, good practice relating to learning outcomes sometimes features institutional approach to quality management or information provided to students, including that on learning outcomes, or overall programme design.

There are recommendations in a number of reports, directly touching upon learning outcomes, that identify further action or development. Several more reports include recommendations for action which indirectly embrace issues around learning outcomes. In these cases, the issues raised related most commonly to assessment and more sporadically to the integrity of programme design, use of external reference points, information for students and student support.

Many audit reports make it clear how the introduction of learning outcomes had prompted a variety of institutional responses and how a shift from learning objectives to learning outcomes had been managed. Again, almost all audit reports confirm, either directly or indirectly, appropriate use of external reference points in respect of learning outcomes.

There were a significant number of comments in reports about programme design, specifically judgements on the extent to which intended learning outcomes at module or unit level allowed the learner to achieve programme level learning outcomes. In general, the results of the discipline audit trails show compellingly that most departments in most institutions, have fully adopted the principles of programme design with respect to learning outcomes.

Assessment as the means by which students demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes was a major theme in many audit reports. In many cases, audit teams were unable to find an explicit linkage between learning outcomes and assessment and this sometimes led to recommendations. Occasionally, this absence could be related to the lack of an institutional assessment policy or to guidelines that were in need of review.

Audit reports reserved their most positive comments for the clarity, comprehensiveness and consistency with which a number of institutions informed students of learning outcomes either in programme or module handbooks or online, as well as through supplementary channels. There is ample evidence in reports that students valued the clarity that the use of learning outcomes had brought to the overall purpose of their programme, the interrelationship between parts of the programme and the nature and purpose of assessment tasks.

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'. One of the ways in which this can be accomplished is through identifying features of good practice across the reports and areas where reports have commonly offered recommendations for improvement.

In due course, QAA intends to produce an extended reflection on institutional audit in the *Learning from...* series, but since the final institutional audit reports in the audit cycle were not published until spring 2006, *Learning from institutional audit* is unlikely to be published in the same year. To give institutions and other stakeholders more timely information, QAA decided to produce a series of short working papers, describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the audit reports, to be published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (hereafter, *Outcomes...*).

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 listings in paragraphs 5, 8 and 9, 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 paragraphs in Sections 2 and 3 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 paragraph number from those Sections 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 to reflection and further development rather than as a model for emulation. A note on the topics identified for the first series of *Outcomes...* papers, which are being published throughout 2005-06, can be found at Appendix 3 (page 17).

The first series of *Outcomes...* papers is based on the 70 institutional audit reports published by the end of November 2004. The second series will draw on institutional audit reports published following the 2004-05 audits. It is likely that there will be some overlap in topics between the first and second series. Papers in each series are perhaps best seen as 'work in progress'. Although QAA retains copyright in the contents of the *Outcomes...* papers they can be freely downloaded from QAA's website and cited, with acknowledgement.

Introduction

1   This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 70 institutional audit reports published by 5 November 2004 (see Appendix 1, page 14). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in the *Outcomes…* series can be found in Appendix 4 (page 19).

2   The development of an approach to higher education programmes based on learning outcomes precedes the introduction of programme specifications (some universities, for example, state in their self-evaluation documents that they have long espoused such an approach). But there is little doubt that the inclusion of programme specifications as a key element in the Academic Infrastructure has served to embed the use of learning outcomes as an almost universal feature of UK higher education programmes. The very definition of a programme specification, adopted by QAA, reads: 'A programme specification is a concise description of the intended learning outcomes of a [higher education] programme, and the means by which the outcomes are achieved and demonstrated' (*Guidelines for preparing programme specifications, QAA, 2006 www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programspec*).

3   It follows that some of the observations recorded in this paper echo points based on material cited in other papers in the *Outcomes…* series, for example the papers addressing programme specifications, assessment of students and subject benchmark statements.

4   One initial observation which touches on the relationship between learning outcomes and other central mechanisms of the Academic Infrastructure is irresistible. A reader of the 70 audit reports cannot fail to notice how often the concept of mapping recurs. It may relate to the mapping of programme outcomes against subject benchmark statements or against *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) or other external reference points. It may relate to the mapping of module learning outcomes against the overarching programme outcomes to make sure that the linkage is clear. It may relate to the mapping of assessment tasks to learning outcomes at programme and module level to make sure that students have the opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of such outcomes. The recurrence is not a coincidence; it signals the desirable coherence of a system or a clear-eyed reading of a complex landscape which nevertheless has an order and integrity in its patterns. Above all, mapping suggests a commitment to prevent students getting lost.

Features of good practice

5   The overwhelming majority of the 70 published institutional audit reports explicitly mention learning outcomes (sometimes referred to as *intended* learning outcomes). Sometimes the reports refer to programme outcomes, sometimes to module/unit outcomes, most often they refer to both). A single report cites learning outcomes specifically in the wording of features of good practice, citing 'the use being made of programme specifications to specify learning outcomes and criteria of assessment' [University of Lincoln, paragraph 268 i; paragraphs 74 and 207].

6   But this single instance should not be taken to indicate a near total absence of good practice in this area. More commonly, good practice relating to learning outcomes is encompassed in a larger concept, such as programme specifications or student handbooks, and is traced by way of the cited paragraph numbers supporting the reported feature of good practice.

7   This larger concept might, for example, be the institutional approach to quality management. The relevant feature of good practice in the report on the Wimbledon School of Art relates to the 'production of the Quality Procedures Handbook' with its articulation of underlying principles which suggest that quality management in the School should include, among other things, a commitment to be 'centred on learning outcomes' [Wimbledon School of Art, paragraph 239 i; paragraph 28].

8   In a number of cases, the feature of good practice embraces learning outcomes as a part of overall programme design.

●   'The detailed and analytical process adopted in the development of programme specifications' (exemplified by the BSc programmes in computer science which share 'a core specification which includes a comprehensive mapping of learning outcomes for each module') [University of Durham, paragraph 212 bullet 3; paragraph 123].

●   'The demonstrable commitment across the University to the enhancement of the quality of the student learning experience' (exemplified by the biological sciences master programmes where the 'programme specifications had been constructed to clearly link the broad aims of the programmes to the overall University educational aims' and where 'learning outcomes differentiated individual programmes in terms of knowledge and skills, as well as in terms of staged exit awards') [The Manchester Metropolitan University, paragraph 202 iii; paragraph 103].

●   'The thoughtful and reflective approach to course design, teaching and student learning in a number of academic departments' (exemplified by the observation arising out of the 'Period Quality Review' that 'the move from writing objectives to writing learning outcomes is helping define more explicitly what students should be able to know and understand') [University of Lancaster, paragraph 238 bullet 2; paragraph 92].

●   'The successful implementation of radical governance reforms to create a coherent structure for the management and provision of teaching across the collegiate University' (exemplified by the 'very good linkage between the learning outcomes, the curriculum, the teaching/learning strategies and the assessment' in new programmes in experimental psychology) [University of Oxford, paragraph 247i; paragraph 169].

9   Elsewhere, reports highlighted good practice in the information provided to students, including that on learning outcomes.

●   The quality of information provided for students' (including clarity 'in setting out, inter alia, programmes of study, learning outcomes, module aims and objectives, and assessment requirements' and leading to students' understanding of 'what was required of them and how assessment at the module level enabled them to meet specified learning outcomes') [Bath Spa University College, paragraph 179 vi; paragraph 142].

- 'Informative and user-friendly student information which is quality assured by robust procedures' (one result of which observed by the audit team was that 'students…were very positive about the handbooks with which they were supplied; in particular, they reported clear assessment criteria and learning outcomes') [Writtle College, paragraph 182 v; paragraph 142].

- 'The development of the School of Art and Design Virtual Office' (one aspect of which related to virtual student handbooks where 'syllabus content, intended learning outcomes and the relationship between assessment and expected outcomes were made clear') [University of Salford, paragraph 208 iii; paragraph 141].

10   In contrast to the single explicit recognition of good practice, there are recommendations in seven reports, directly touching upon learning outcomes, that identify further action or development. Several more reports include recommendations for action which indirectly embrace issues around learning outcomes. In these cases, the issues related most commonly to assessment, occasionally to the integrity of programme design, use of external reference points, information for students and student support.

Themes

11   This section of the paper expands on the broad patterns mentioned above in order to provide information which can be considered within different institutional contexts. Each theme is supported by examples taken from the institutional audit reports published by November 2004. The themes include:

- institutional approaches to learning outcomes

- the use of external reference points

- programme design

- assessment

- information provided to students.

Institutional approaches to learning outcomes

12   The introduction of learning outcomes as an integral part of the Academic Infrastructure, deriving from subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ, and captured in programme and module specifications, appears to have prompted a variety of institutional responses. Some institutions are reported as recognising explicitly the fundamental impact of adopting a learning outcomes based approach to provision, described in one case as 'a philosophical shift to define student attainment in terms of achieved learning outcomes on all modules taken'. Others saw the opportunity to use learning outcomes as central to the setting of standards, as a 'key element' of the quality management and enhancement framework or of quality management principles, as a way of reflecting 'the strategic plan of the [institution] at programme level', or as a means of defining common characteristics of the institution's graduates. Even those institutions that indicated a long-held learning outcomes based approach suggested in their self-evaluation documents that their national adoption had led to 'a stronger identification of the relationship between learning outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment practices' or a recognition that 'the old processes were not fully explicit in their relationship with the FHEQ'.

13   The shift is described in some audit reports as a 'move from writing objectives to writing learning outcomes' or a 'revision of module descriptors from learning objective to learning outcome format' or a 'transition from writing learning objectives to learning outcomes'. Audit reports commented on how this shift had been managed, noting in one institution the setting up of a 'Working Group on Learning Outcomes' which was praised for the significance of its analysis and in another an institution-wide project entitled 'Learning Outcomes and their Assessment'. Centrally produced guidelines, guidance notes and templates were commonly used to assist staff in what was more often than not a major institutional task.

14   It is apparent that not all staff embraced the learning outcomes approach with equal enthusiasm. One audit report notes that 'individual staff show differing levels of awareness…of significant ongoing debate about, for example, benchmarking, learning outcomes and assessment criteria'; another noted the institution had been encouraged in an earlier audit cycle to consider 'improvement of staff understanding of the importance of learning outcomes'. In recognition of an identified need, one institution's self-evaluation document was stated to have declared the institution's intention to provide 'additional training in the writing of learning outcomes'. Another self-evaluation document was said to have 'acknowledged that relating intended learning outcomes to learning, teaching and assessment strategies had caused particular difficulties for academic staff', even though the institution 'had historically described its provision in terms of aims and learning outcomes'. One discipline self-evaluation document was stated to have indicated that staff had found 'the transition from a programme defined by its syllabus to one defined by intended learning outcomes challenging'. In this instance, the audit report noted that 'staff development continues within the School to support this transition'.

The use of external reference points

15   At the heart of widespread institutional efforts to review or (in effect) revalidate provision in an attempt to align programmes with the FHEQ and emerging subject benchmark statements, it is not surprising to find that the appropriate use of learning outcomes is almost universally seen, both in institutional evidence and in reports, as the single most important locus of that alignment. Specifically, discipline self-evaluation documents produced for DATs invariably focused on the process by which the relevant department or school had sought to redefine its provision with respect to external reference points. Almost without exception, audit reports comment on the extent to which institutions use external reference points as guidance when programme learning outcomes are being formulated; most mention (but less frequently) the influence of such reference points on the crafting of module or unit learning outcomes.

16   By definition, those reference points that constitute the Academic Infrastructure (FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*) and programme specifications) are central to most institutional audit reports and, in general, are the focus for comments on learning outcomes; but they are not the only external reference points that attract commentary. Where subject benchmark statements were not available, one audit report observed with approval how the institution had chosen to benchmark learning outcomes closely against 'the

accreditation requirements of the [National Council for the Training of Journalists] and the [Broadcast Journalism Training Council] and the approval requirements of the [Institute of Public Relations]'. Elsewhere, even when subject benchmark statements were available, audit reports noted the care taken by some institutions in aligning learning outcomes with additional external reference points. For example, in one case, 'the joint announcement of the Law Society and the General Council of the Bar on Qualifying Law Degrees' as well as the 'Law Society requirements for the PGDip Legal Practice', and, in another, '[Royal Institute of British Architects] and [the Architects Registration Board] practice-based outcomes'.

17   On the whole, audit reports were able to confirm that institutions were making successful efforts to make sure that their programme outcomes adhered to external reference points. On the evidence of the audit reports, subject benchmark statements, where available, can be held to have had an almost universal impact on the redrawing of learning outcomes. The rare counter-example ('the [institution] needs to demonstrate more clearly the links between subject benchmarks statements and learning outcomes at both programme and module level') stands out in this context.

18   In comparison with adherence to subject benchmark statements, alignment of learning outcomes with the FHEQ was the subject of more equivocal commentary. It may be possible that, whereas discipline specialists can recognise and adjust to peer-created subject benchmark statements, some have felt slightly less comfortable in adapting to the notion of level descriptors found in the FHEQ and in framing learning outcomes accordingly.

19   At one institution, for example, programme specifications 'did not currently use the appropriate M-level descriptors for describing what were clearly advanced, masters-level learning outcomes'. At another, 'while the evidence available to the team supports the view that the learning outcomes…are consistent with the benchmarking statements, it was not clear to the team how the expectations of the FHEQ with respect to progression from level to level were demonstrated'.

20   More often than not, when an audit report raises a matter for further development, the challenge relates not to degree level outcomes but rather to the need to integrate the FHEQ concept of levels and progression into the programme's internal design. The clearest expression of this concern is articulated in one report which points out that 'programme specifications describe the final level outcomes only, and make no attempt to detail those for each undergraduate level'. Faced with a similar lack, another report encourages the institution 'to use the FHEQ to make explicit outcomes for exit points at the certificate, diploma and masters levels'.

21   A cluster of audit reports draw attention to issues around differentiation between bachelor's and master's levels. One agreed with a recent accreditation report which had recommended that the relevant department 'focus more closely on the learning outcomes expected for a BEng (Hons) and MEng graduate'. Another took a similar view: 'as the programme specifications stand at present, there is insufficient differentiation between learning outcomes for the BEng and MEng programmes and there is a need for clearer links with the FHEQ'. Occasionally, the difficulty found by the audit team touched more on matters of presentation than substance, so that,

although 'differentiation between the bachelors and undergraduate masters programmes' was unclear to the audit team in the programme specifications, 'examination of individual module descriptors confirmed that the final year of the MEng programme operated at an appropriately differentiated level from the BEng programme'.

22   It is rare to find a more general difficulty, so that the report that comments simply on one institution's policy by pointing out that 'there is no requirement for subject teams to explain how the learning outcomes align with the qualifications descriptors in the FHEQ' is unusual without being unique. That particular observation led to a recommendation in the audit report that the institution consider including 'in the procedures for approving programme specifications, and in the guidance for preparing them, information on the ways in which learning outcomes, and the assessment methods used to demonstrate their achievement, can be matched to descriptors of level'.

23   Another audit report prompts an institution 'to consider revisiting the FHEQ and to explore ways in which this could increase the understanding of levels of study more widely across the [institution]'. Continuing, the report noted that the institution's 'programme specification template does not make specific reference to any aspect of the academic infrastructure' and recommends that 'it may be worth considering ways in which fuller use of the FHEQ in describing award outcomes could increase the value of the programme specifications to the full range of intended audiences'.

24   But the overwhelming majority of audit reports confirm, either directly or indirectly (for example, through comments on programme specifications), appropriate use of external reference points in respect of learning outcomes. A comment in a report, elicited by a discipline audit trial, identifies 'a good illustration of the use of the mapping of intended learning outcomes at module and programme levels in relation to relevant subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ'. One report records that all the programme specifications seen by the team 'included detailed commentaries demonstrating how the learning outcomes were appropriate to the respective levels of the FHEQ'. Another notes a valuable engagement with the Academic Infrastructure in the way in which programme specifications 'made clear reference to the relevant subject benchmark statements, while the stage learning outcomes parallel the levels defined in the FHEQ'.

Programme design

25   If there is one area where audit reports have consistently commented on learning outcomes, it is with respect to programme design, specifically a view on the extent to which intended learning outcomes at module or unit level allow the learner to achieve programme level intended learning outcomes. Such a view is often framed in terms of the presence or absence of effective mapping of module outcomes against programme outcomes.

26   A comment such as that found in one audit report, 'programme learning outcomes were carefully mapped against individual units', represents an approving comment in minimal terms. The same positive judgement is seen in another conclusion that 'the Department provides a core specification which includes a comprehensive mapping of learning outcomes for each module' or elsewhere that

'programme outcomes are mapped across the unit portfolio, including reference to the units of study in which these outcomes are assessed' or, in a comment that confirms a commendation arrived at through internal review, that 'the specification sets out clearly, and in simple language, the aims and learning outcomes of the set of programmes and provides a visual mapping of all requirements and outcomes by module and programme'.

27   In a similar vein, other audit reports talk of 'useful documents mapping achievement of outcomes by module against pathway specifications' and 'curriculum maps' which indicate 'the relationship between the programme learning outcomes and the specific modules available for each programme'. It is clear from these examples that audit teams were commonly impressed by careful mapping procedures that demonstrated how programme level outcomes could be met.

28   From the reports published by November 2004, it is equally clear that some institutions, while attending to the need to take into account external reference points, were yet to understand fully the importance of the integrity and self-standing coherence of internal programme design. Some institutions, perhaps prompted by the audit visit, recognised shortcomings in this respect and showed signs of taking positive action. One report, for example, noted that, although the sample of programme specifications provided in advance of the visit showed 'little relationship between intended learning outcomes at programme and module level', an example provided during the audit visit demonstrated how 'programme and module outcomes were being successfully integrated'. In this instance, the team encouraged the institution in its stated intention to extend this approach to all its programmes.

29   In the case of another institution, a discipline self-evaluation document produced to support its audit appeared to anticipate the view expressed in the audit report that the absence of any mapping of programme learning outcomes against core modules made it 'difficult to map module assessment to the programme learning outcomes in a systematic manner' and indicated that 'a mapping exercise [was] under development'.

30   Sometimes, the shortcomings mentioned above had been identified by an institution prior to its audit, via its own internal review processes. In this vein, at one institution, the internal review panel had indicated that 'the mapping of learning outcomes at programme and module level was not always clear'; a school board working party was to be set up to address the matter. At another institution, its own internal review process had 'noted that the learning outcomes at module level did not always match those at programme level and a mapping exercise [was stated to be] underway to address this'.

31   Showing similar self-awareness, one audit report stated that the self-evaluation document for the audit had 'highlighted questions that had arisen during the preparation of programme specifications, such as whether the aims and learning outcomes of core and mandatory units attached to each programme supported the programme aims and learning outcomes'. In this instance, the audit report agreed with the institution that these questions needed to be addressed and recommended that the institution 'ensure that, in completing the programme specifications for all programmes, the award of University credits takes account of the interrelationship between [intended learning outcomes] at the unit and programme levels'.

32   Another institution made minutes of a degree board available as part of the information for the audit. These noted that 'the current programme curriculum does not necessarily ensure that all students will achieve all the programme learning outcomes as defined in the specification' and that action was being taken to address this mismatch. In this case, the audit report argued that this lack of coherence - although identified by the course team itself - stemmed from an institutional approach (evidenced elsewhere) that appeared to favour content-led courses rather than outcomes-led design. It recommended that the institution 'review the effectiveness of its procedures for determining whether intended learning outcomes will be met through all pathways leading to named awards'.

33   The paragraphs above demonstrate a degree of self-awareness at some level within the relevant institutions. Such is not always the case. A specific concern raised in the course of one discipline audit trial was that, without further work by the institution to specify learning outcomes with more clarity, particularly with regard to the level of work required to meet them, 'successful students will not have demonstrated achievement of all the intended learning outcomes for their programme of study'. This concern goes right to the heart of programme design and its key function of allowing students to be able to demonstrate that they can achieve all programme outcomes. One audit report, acknowledging the importance of information technology (IT) provision to a particular curriculum, as signalled in specific programme outcomes, nevertheless was not convinced that the IT content of core elements was 'sufficient to deliver intended outcomes'. In another programme, 'examination of module learning outcomes…for the level 3 modules…revealed that a number could not easily be mapped against the programme outcomes in the programme specification and appeared inappropriate to the final year of an honours degree course'. In such cases, the integrity of the programme design needed serious attention.

34   Lack of self-awareness is rare. One institution however, acknowledged, when asked, that there was no 'formal guidance for course teams regarding the principles of course design and staff familiarity with elements of the academic infrastructure [was] patchy'; it is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the audit report for that institution stated that 'there is insufficient, and sometimes no, differentiation between the named awards in terms of programme aims and intended learning outcomes'.

35   In general, the results of discipline audit trails show compellingly that most programme teams and departments in most institutions have fully understood the principles of programme design with respect to learning outcomes, not just in terms of internal coherence between module and programme levels but also in terms of the relationship between learning outcomes, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment. Hence, the frequency in the discipline audit trail section of audit reports of the wording, 'Programme specifications set out appropriate learning outcomes and link these clearly to teaching, learning and assessment'. Of these linkages, assessment provokes most comment in audit reports. By way of contrast, perhaps, there is relatively little developed commentary in the reports on linkages to learning and teaching strategies.

Assessment

36   It is now commonly accepted that assessment is, among other things, the means by which students demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. The validity of

such a statement has a certain obviousness about it; yet, the absence of any explicit linkage between learning outcomes and assessment was a relatively frequent cause of concern in audit reports. One comment (linked to a later recommendation) noted that 'while all [programme specifications] contained statements of learning outcomes, the team found that practice was variable in relating these to assessment strategies'. In this case, the institution was advised to 'ensure that the link between learning outcomes and assessment is made explicit for students in all parts of the University through the mapping of learning outcomes against assessment strategies, reflecting the University's commitment to student equity considerations'. Patchiness is often the issue; even where clear assessment and grading criteria were provided, in one institution, 'they did not always indicate which learning outcomes were being assessed' - a comment echoed in another report which remarked that 'students confirmed that it was not usual for them to be given explicit and detailed criteria relating assessment tasks to the intended learning outcomes of a module'.

37   Such inconsistency can point to a lack of an institutional assessment policy. One discipline audit trail, for example, revealed some issues that required attention at departmental level but were symptomatic of an institutional hesitation. In this case the audit report encouraged the [institution] 'within the context of its response to the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students…*to finalise its consideration of assessment linked to learning outcomes'. A similar policy vacuum contributed to one audit report's recommendation that an institution develop, without delay, a more consistent approach to course design, delivery and assessment, 'with particular attention to a uniform system for the definition, across the institution, of generic and subject-specific learning outcomes linked to assessment criteria'.

38   Elsewhere, an audit report found that a template designed by the University 'did not make explicit the need for a clear relationship between learning outcomes and assessment' or, in another report, that the institution's guidelines on programme specifications failed to link learning outcomes explicitly to teaching or assessment methods. Another institution did not require in its standard documentation for curriculum approval any 'explanations of why the assessment methods used are appropriate or how they matched with the learning outcomes', a deficiency that contributed to a later recommendation. A further institution did not require module/unit specifications and, where they nevertheless existed, did not require that they indicated learning outcomes or a statement of assessment methods. In this latter instance, the report advised the institution to put in place such unit specifications with a particular encouragement to ensure 'that both learning outcomes and the associated assessment methods are specified'.

39   Despite these examples of uncertainty either at the level of practice or policy, most reports indicate pervasive attention paid at both levels to the coherent linkage between learning outcomes and assessment, particularly within units or modules. The frequency of the phrasing cited in paragraph 35 above attests to this fact.

40   At programme level, audit reports recognised the good practice of producing 'assessment maps' which allow a reader to understand where programme level outcomes are assessed within units, or of including in programme specification documents 'clear statements of learning outcomes which have been mapped against

varying modes of assessment'. Elsewhere, a report noted how 'assessment tasks are clearly mapped to module learning outcomes', with recognised benefits for students. Without such maps, it is possible to leave gaps in the assessment of learning outcomes. This lay behind one audit report's advice that a University should 'continue to work to ensure that the full range of student achievement and skills, as described in programme specifications, are summatively assessed by appropriate means', advice driven by the team's view that in this instance there was 'no identifiable process by which some of the intended learning outcomes identified in programme specifications can be tested'.

41   Other benefits of a learning outcomes approach to assessment were identified in other audit reports. Students were stated in one report to have commented to the audit team how useful the feedback on assessment tasks was when it directly addressed the learning outcomes, whereas another team regretted that the 'sample of feedback comments…made little explicit reference to learning outcomes'. Once again, there were examples of institutional documentation not steering staff towards good practice. While one report noted the existence of an institutional standard form for assessment feedback for students, it reflected that it 'does not ask staff to comment on the module specific outcomes, and in consequence some feedback, while full and appropriate in general terms, does not identify learning outcomes which have not been fully addressed'.

42   In two institutions, audit reports acknowledged that the need to meet learning outcomes identified in programme specifications had led to the positive introduction of 'a broader range of assessment methods' and to 'forms of assessment [that] have become more varied as they are tied in more precisely to learning outcomes'. In response to concerns raised by external examiners that not all staff were utilising the full range of marks, one institution chose to emphasise in its institutional assessment strategy 'the use of intended learning outcomes linked to assessment criteria' as a way of encouraging staff to engage with different mark ranges at undergraduate level.

Information provided to students

43   Two statements to ponder: 'The team…considered that explicit learning outcomes should be routinely communicated to students' and, in another audit report, 'Although programme learning outcomes are stated in the programme specification, they have not up to now been communicated to students'. The reassurance that an institution gives itself (and others) about the standards of its awards through benchmarking with external reference points and through scrutinising the internal coherence of its programmes is, arguably, at one remove from the direct student experience. The linkage of learning outcomes to assessment tasks, for example, impinges much more intensely on the way students study - especially if they are informed of what they are. For every report that expresses some degree of surprise at omissions in communicating central information to students, there are many more that recognise with approval the efforts made by institutions to explain to learners the fundamental dynamics of their programme.

44   At a basic level, this explanation is done through programme or module handbooks, either in hard copy or online or both. These may be the result of departmental or institutional policy, the provision of templates in support of such policies being common. But some audit reports enthusiastically note highly

structured, institution-driven policies and practices which go beyond the minimum and appear to give much valued help and confidence to students.

45   For example, students at one institution 'were clear about the intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria, on the basis of handbooks, explanations at induction, and supplementary materials provided by staff as appropriate. The fact that material was available in hard copy and on the Virtual Campus was seen as a particular strength' [University of Lincoln, paragraph 143]. At the same institution, the team looked at a sample of handbooks, including handbooks for each level of study and some unit handbooks. It noted that 'handbooks for each level of study followed a common template, and unit handbooks were often very similar in structure and content' [University of Lincoln, paragraph 199]. The fact that the handbooks were written in easily accessible language was highlighted in the report. The report noted that 'programme specifications, and in particular the learning outcomes, and the associated unit learning outcomes, were considered by the students to be very helpful in focusing their studies' [University of Lincoln, paragraph 74]; and that 'students expressed full confidence that requirements embodied in assessments match their expectations, based on published learning outcomes and assessment criteria' [University of Lincoln, paragraph 142].

46   Good practice of a similar nature is recorded in many audit reports, which note how 'valuable', 'useful', and 'helpful' carefully crafted handbooks are to students [see for example, Bath Spa University College, paragraphs 105 and 142; and Writtle College, paragraph 142]. The evidence points to the fact that students are perfectly capable of assimilating the vocabulary of quality assurance, especially when it relates to their own direct need.

47   On the other hand, some students appear to be able to survive without being given the chance of such assimilation. One audit report commented succinctly: 'The student handbooks seen by the audit team were quite basic and did not make use of intended learning outcomes - a term unfamiliar to the students who met the team'. This is an exceptional case. Generally, the encouragement in reports is aimed at asking institutions to supplement their information, to increase its clarity, or to ensure consistency.

Conclusion

48   The audit reports reveal a sector that is faced with a major development in the way in which its academic staff conceptualise the programmes that they design, approve, deliver, assess, monitor and review. The notion of learning outcomes has not been uncontested and the reader can sense, in some reports, that some institutions have found more difficulty than others in introducing them as a keystone of programme and module/unit design. Nevertheless, there is a clear indication in the 70 audit reports that, despite differential rates of progress between and within institutions, the adoption of learning outcomes has been addressed with vigour.

49   The most striking aspect of their introduction has been, according to the audit reports, the value attached to them by students who appreciate the clarity they have brought to the overall purpose of their programme, the interrelationship between parts of the programme and the nature and purpose of assessment tasks.

Appendix 1 - The institutional audit reports

2002-03

University College Chichester, February 2003

The Royal Veterinary College, February 2003

Cumbria Institute of the Arts, March 2003

Institute of Education, University of London, March 2003

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, March 2003

Middlesex University, March 2003

Royal Academy of Music, March 2003

Royal College of Art, March 2003

University of Cambridge, April 2003

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, April 2003

Bath Spa University College, May 2003

University of Lincoln, May 2003

London Business School, May 2003

Newman College of Higher Education, May 2003

Norwich School of Art and Design, May 2003

Rose Bruford College, May 2003

Royal College of Music, May 2003

Royal Northern College of Music, May 2003

The School of Pharmacy, University of London, May 2003

College of St Mark and St John, May 2003

The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College, May 2003

Trinity and All Saints College, May 2003

Trinity College of Music, May 2003

Royal College of Nursing Institute, July 2003

2003-04

University of Bath, October 2003

University of Bradford, November 2003

University of Buckingham, November 2003

University of Essex, November 2003

University of Exeter, November 2003

University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, November 2003

University of Sheffield, November 2003

Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, December 2003

Royal Agricultural College, December 2003

University of Southampton, December 2003

St Martin's College, Lancaster, December 2003

University of Surrey, Roehampton, December 2003

University of York, December 2003

University of East Anglia, January 2004

University of Durham, February 2004

University of Liverpool, February 2004

Writtle College, February 2004

Bournemouth University, March 2004

The Institute of Cancer Research, March 2004

University of Kent, March 2004

University of Leeds, March 2004

Loughborough University, March 2004

Open University, March 2004

University of Oxford, March 2004

University of Salford, March 2004

University of Warwick, March 2004

University of Wolverhampton, March 2004

Aston University, April 2004

University of Birmingham, April 2004

University of Bristol, April 2004

University of Central Lancashire, April 2004

Coventry University, April 2004

The London Institute, April 2004

University of Portsmouth, April 2004

Anglia Polytechnic University, May 2004

University of Brighton, May 2004

Brunel University, May 2004

University of Keele, May 2004

The Nottingham Trent University, May 2004

University of Reading, May 2004

University of Sussex, May 2004

Wimbledon School of Art, May 2004

University of Greenwich, June 2004

King's College London, June 2004

University of Lancaster, June 2004

The Manchester Metropolitan University, June 2004

Appendix 2 - Reports on specialist institutions

The Royal Veterinary College, February 2003

Cumbria Institute of the Arts, March 2003

Institute of Education, University of London, March 2003

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, March 2003

Royal Academy of Music, March 2003

Royal College of Art, March 2003

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, April 2003

London Business School, May 2003

Newman College of Higher Education, May 2003

Norwich School of Art and Design, May 2003

Rose Bruford College, May 2003

Royal College of Music, May 2003

Royal Northern College of Music, May 2003

The School of Pharmacy, University of London, May 2003

The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College, May 2003

Trinity and All Saints College, May 2003

Trinity College of Music, May 2003

Royal College of Nursing Institute, July 2003

Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, December 2003

Royal Agricultural College, December 2003

Writtle College, February 2004

The Institute of Cancer Research, March 2004

The London Institute, April 2004

Wimbledon School of Art, May 2004

Appendix 3 - Titles of *Outcomes from institutional audit papers,* Series 1

In most cases, *Outcomes...* papers will be no longer than 15 sides of A4. They are published on QAA's website to assist ready access. QAA retains copyright in the *Outcomes...* papers, but as noted earlier, they may be freely used with acknowledgement.

Titles of *Outcomes...* papers in the first series are listed below.

Title	Publishing date
Initial overview	April 2005
External examiners and their reports	April 2005
Programme specifications	April 2005
Staff support and development arrangements	October 2005
Student representation and feedback arrangements	November 2005
Programme monitoring arrangements	January 2006
Assessment of students	January 2006
Learning support resources, including virtual learning environment	January 2006
Validation and approval of new provision and periodic review	January 2006
Work-based and placement learning, and employability	March 2006
Arrangements for international students	March 2006
Progression and completion statistics	March 2006
Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports	March 2006
Specialist institutions	July 2006
The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland	July 2006
Subject benchmark statements	September 2006
Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degree programmes	October 2006
Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies	October 2006
Academic guidance, support and supervision, and personal support and guidance	October 2006
Institutions' support for e-learning	October 2006
Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards	December 2006

Appendix 4 - Methodology

The methodology followed in analysing 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 institutional 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 was taken from the Adobe Acrobat® documents published on the QAA website and converted to plain text format. The resulting files were checked for accuracy and coded into sections following the template used to construct the institutional audit reports. In addition, the text of each report was tagged with information providing the date the report was published and some basic characteristics of the institution (base data). The reports were 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 have been used to locate features of good practice and recommendations to the particular sections of the report to which they refer.

Individual papers in the *Outcomes...* series are compiled by QAA staff and experienced institutional auditors. To assist in compiling the papers, reports produced by QSR N6® have been made available 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.