Outcomes from institutional audit

Learning support resources, including virtual learning environments

Summary

Learning support resources include information technology (IT), libraries, reprographics, specialist equipment or activities, teaching space and some elements of student support. The institutional audit reports deal primarily with the management of such resources, and the effectiveness of the support provided and its management, rather than with the detail of delivery. They are discussed in nearly all the first 70 audit reports (one report relates to an institution with no undergraduate teaching).

Consideration of the first 70 institutional audit reports suggests that overall, institutions have established suitable learning support resources and arrangements to manage and match them to the requirements of their academic portfolios. The reports also indicate that institutions generally maintain an appropriate institutional overview of learning support resources, and that these resources are both sufficient and well managed.

Almost a third of the first 70 reports include references to features of good practice in learning support resources, while about a fifth of them include recommendations in this area. Of such recommendations, the greater part are desirable and they mostly focus upon the management of learning support resources in terms of structures, policies and practices that underpinned the students' learning experiences rather than on the details of delivery. On the whole, the reports have found that learning support arrangements have been suitable in their institutional contexts. Where this has not been the case, reports have recommended that institutions consider how their learning support resources might be more coherently managed.

Academic and resource planning procedures have, on the whole, been found to be sufficient and appropriate within their institutional context. Where planning procedures have been found to lack formality, or they have left resources at risk, further attention has been recommended. Several reports have drawn attention to the need, in the context of particular institutions, to set realistic expectations among staff and students. This process of setting expectations has also fed into strategies for the induction and training of students.

Overall the reports show that institutions monitor the continuing appropriateness of their learning support provision to their portfolios and missions. Most institutions also seek frank student feedback and to respond to such feedback in a prompt and meaningful way. A number of reports have found barriers (sometimes in perception rather than in fact) to the adoption of recommendations arising from feedback, including making resources available to tackle difficulties. In such cases they have offered recommendations.

Virtual learning environments (VLEs) have been introduced in a number of institutions in the UK. They have largely been implemented successfully and in almost all cases students have responded positively to their introduction. Most of the institutions that have introduced VLEs have organised their implementation in a systematic fashion and have given close attention to the technical and staff development aspects of their implementation. Where this has not been the case reports have offered recommendations, including that consideration be given to the institution-wide consequences of introducing a VLE.

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 audit* series, but since the final institutional audit reports in the present audit cycle will not be published until spring 2006, *Learning from institutional audit* is unlikely to be published before late 2006. To give institutions and other stakeholders more timely information, QAA has therefore 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 initial listing in paragraph 6, the first reference is to the numbered or bulleted lists of features of good practice in each institutional audit report, the second to the relevant paragraphs 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 paragraph 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 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, to be published throughout 2005, can be found at Appendix 3 (page 18).

This 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, and it is likely that there will be some overlap in topics between the first and second series. Papers in each series might best be 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.

Learning support resources: introduction and general overview

1   This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the first 70 institutional audits published by 5 November 2004 (see Appendix 1, page 15). 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   According to the *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002), 'At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students - in terms of the quality of the information they receive about their programmes of study, the ways in which their learning is facilitated and supported, and the academic standards that they are expected to achieve, and do achieve in practice'. For the purposes of the institutional audit process (and this paper) learning support resources include IT, libraries, reprographics, specialist equipment or activities, teaching space and some elements of student support.

3   In the development of learning (and teaching) support arrangements, the introduction of VLEs has been a relative newcomer in many institutions. The institutional audit reports do not provide a separate section for VLEs, but the number of references to them is such that a separate note on their use has been included in this paper (see page 11).

4   Audit reports describe the institution's view of its learning support resources and its approach to ensuring that resources are adequate. They also describe the students' view of the quality of learning support resources (as indicated in the students' written submissions and information from subject-based enquiries through discipline audit trails). The reports are expected to offer an analysis of the evidence on these matters provided by the institution and the extent to which the learning support resources made available are suitable to support the learning of students and the teaching provided for them. The reports are also expected to comment on how the institution satisfies itself that its arrangements in these areas meet its requirements.

5   It is clear from the first 70 reports that most institutions make sufficient provision for learning support resources (within the context of their own mission). They have appropriate strategies and processes in place, both to plan and to monitor their learning support resources and their continuing relevance to their students' needs.

Features of good practice

6   The following features of good practice in relation to learning support resources can be found in the first 70 audit reports:

- the approach to developing e-learning and distance learning, and the supporting infrastructure that has been established [The Royal Veterinary College, paragraph 25 ii; paragraphs 66, 112 and 139]

- the management of the student engagement with resource areas through the Bronze/Silver/Gold/Platinum induction model [Cumbria Institute of the Arts, paragraph 179 ii; paragraph 99]

- the academic and pastoral support available to its students [Royal Academy of Music, paragraph 143 iii; paragraphs 77 and 99]

- the way in which the Academy systematically tries to provide an individually tailored learning experience for its students [Royal Academy of Music, paragraph 143 iv; paragraphs 83 and 87]

- the support given to students with special needs by the [Learning and Teaching Unit] and the Library [School of Oriental and African Studies, paragraph 299 iv; paragraphs 122 and 125]

- the support provided to students and staff through the learning resource centre [Rose Bruford College, paragraph 150 iii; paragraphs 99 and 102]

- emerging good practice in relation to the use of new learning technologies [The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College, paragraph 147 vi; paragraphs 59 and 66]

- the wide variety of support available to students to enable them to access appropriate learning support resources [Trinity College of Music, paragraph 153 iv; paragraphs 88, 90, 91 and 102]

- the high calibre of programmes of study including learning materials and Study Guides provided to students [Royal College of Nursing Institute, paragraph 158 i; paragraphs 22, 95 and 114]

- the support of students provided by central services, including the [Learning Resources Centre], within the context of widening participation and diversity [Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, paragraph 210 ii; paragraphs 127, 136 and 143]

- the College's welcome openness and transparent approach to audit and in its dialogue with peers [Royal Agricultural College, paragraph 176 iv; paragraphs 65, 77 and 94]

- the academic and personal support services [University of Surrey Roehampton, paragraph 171 ii; paragraphs 64, 75, 85, 103 and 127]

- the liaison arrangements between its schools, the Library, and the Careers Service [University of East Anglia, paragraph 275 iii; paragraphs 111 and 126]

- the breadth, depth and accessibility of material provided by the internet-based [Interactive Education Unit] to meet the needs of students with respect to their personal development and wider understanding of cancer and cancer therapies [The Institute of Cancer Research, paragraph 142 iii; paragraph 104]

- the University's support for its students whether domiciled in the UK or overseas, for example, through its personal tutor arrangements, including the use of Co-Tutor software to track and record students' meetings with their tutors...and the provision of support for students' sporting activities at all levels [Loughborough University, paragraph 317 vii, paragraphs 125, 127 and 134]

- the successful implementation of radical governance reforms to create a coherent structure for the management and provision of teaching across the collegiate University [University of Oxford, paragraph 247 i; paragraphs 30, 34, 43, 107 and 169]

- the high level of resources made available for supporting students' learning [University of Oxford, paragraph 247 vi; paragraphs 104, 108 and 121]

- the introduction, by one of the site libraries, of special measures to meet the particular needs of part-time students, including a postal loan service [University of Brighton, paragraph 255 iv; paragraph 100]

- the consistent commitment of the University to its support of students and their learning, and its student-centred approach, illustrated through the work of student services, in the academic support provided by academic staff and in the provision of learning resources [The Nottingham Trent University, paragraph 236 ii; paragraphs 104, 109, 113 and 118]

- the institutional provision of a supportive and high-quality learning environment for students [Manchester Metropolitan University, paragraph 202 vi; paragraphs 88 to 92 and 101].

Reference should also be made to features of good practice with respect to VLEs, which appear in paragraph 36 below.

7   In addition to the features of good practice set out above, 15 of the 70 first audit reports contain recommendations that relate to learning support resources, almost two-thirds of which were 'desirable'.

Themes

8   In reviewing the first 70 audit reports and the recommendations they have offered with respect to learning support resources, common themes relate to:

- the structure of arrangements to manage such resources

- the capacity of institutions to achieve a strategic overview of their learning support resources

- the extent to which different parts of the institution work together to provide comparable levels of learning support resources for all students

- setting of student expectations and clarification of minimum and typical levels of provision

- student consultations, and institutional responses to the outcomes of such consultations.

9   Consideration of these themes suggests the following structure for this paper:

- structures and strategies for learning support resources

- links between academic and resource planning

- institutional monitoring of learning support resources and feedback from students on their experiences of them.

Structure and strategy

10   The institutional audit process seeks to identify which individual or body in the institution is responsible for the long-term planning for learning support resources. The size of many contemporary higher education institutions, both in the number of their students and, frequently, their estates and their geographical spread, has required many to consider how to establish an overview of their provision of learning

support resources. Most of the published audit reports describe management arrangements that have enabled the relevant institutions to assess their capacity to provide learning support resources to support their academic and management activities. In one collegiate institution, recent reforms of institutional governance had created a coherent structure for managing the provision of teaching across the institution. In addition, this had also produced an effective structure for monitoring the provision of learning support resources and for collecting and responding to student feedback [University of Oxford, 107].

11   While the first 70 audit reports indicate that most institutions have a clear view of where responsibility for the development of their learning support resources are located, a number of reports have recommended that institutions reconsider their arrangements. For example, in one case the report suggested that 'the assurance of the quality and appropriateness of learning support resources would be strengthened by the identification of the locus of responsibility for managing the learning environment' in support of the institution's learning and teaching strategy. In another case, where the development of the institution's IT provision came within the purview of several committees, the report suggested that this complexity was potentially confusing, and could hinder the pursuit of a coherent strategy. This led to a recommendation that the institution should streamline its committee structure.

12   The first 70 reports indicate that many institutions have developed formal strategies to guide them in planning their learning support resources. Where the implementation of particular strategies appears to be delivering notable benefits to students, this has been commented on in the relevant reports. For example, in one case the institution's 'supportive and high-quality learning environment' was identified as a feature of good practice. More particularly, the estates strategy (which had been designed to assist in modernising and rationalising the institution's estates) made a substantial contribution to enhancing the learning environment [Manchester Metropolitan University, 91-92]. Similarly, where consolidation onto one campus had allowed another institution to construct a bespoke learning resource centre, the quality of the support the latter offered was also identified as a feature of good practice [Rose Bruford College, 99 and 102].

13   Overall, audit teams have found that most institutions are managing their learning support resources in a strategic manner, given their individual priorities and constraints, and that such strategies had been formally documented. Where draft documentation had not been finalised, reports generally recommended that it should be completed.

14   In general, institutions were found to coordinate the different elements of their learning support resources effectively. In some instances, however, this was not the case. One report, for example, found that the level of library provision available to students varied according to the level of activity of departmental library representatives and the closeness of liaison between academic staff and the library over reading lists and use of the reserve collection. In this case, while the report noted that these matters were being addressed, it also observed that some student concerns 'reflected [a] lack of coordinated working between all academic staff and the library which detracted from the quality of the students' learning environment'. The institution was encouraged to 'consider further ways of coordinating the work of academic staff and the library in order to alleviate this problem'.

15   There is potential for an absence of strategic direction in the development of learning support resources to affect the delivery of teaching. For example, in one institution, the audit report found that IT provision 'lacked strategic direction, and has been provided remedially rather than as a result of planning requirements to meet curriculum needs'. The report observed that one consequence of this contingent approach was that the institution was unable to demonstrate that 'the provision of IT training through core course elements was sufficient to guarantee the achievement of the IT-related intended learning outcomes by all students, as stated in the programme specification' and this illustrated the 'need to develop further the linkage between specifications at programme and course element levels'.

Learning resource planning in the development of new provision, monitoring and periodic review

16   As observed above, the management of learning support resources and the level of investment in them is likely to have an effect upon the delivery of teaching and upon the student learning experience. The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review* (2000) suggests that learning support resources should be considered during programme approval, monitoring and review.

Learning resource planning in developing new provision

17   In the first 70 audit reports, the manner in which the specific resources and services are aligned with the needs of an institution's academic portfolio and wider institutional priorities was the subject of several recommendations. In some institutions, resource issues are clearly considered in processes for programme approval, validation and review. The audit reports make it clear that staff working with learning support resources are frequently involved at this stage. In one case, consideration of resource issues after in-principle approval tended to be conducted on an informal basis. The relevant report recommended that formal consideration be given to the learning resource implications of programmes, prior to validation or review. As part of the same recommendation, the report found it desirable that the institution put procedures in place to review resources where student numbers had changed significantly.

18   Many institutions make careful attempts to set and manage expectations for levels of resource provision, in their academic and resource planning procedures. For example, a number of institutions make use of sector-wide benchmarks or measures broadly accepted as such. These include the results of surveys and analyses carried out by bodies such as the Society of College National and University Libraries (SCONUL), the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA).

19   In a small number of cases, audit reports observed that planning the level of provision for particular areas of the curriculum could be improved. In one such case, the report recommended that the institution 'pay particular attention to the systematic identification of learning resource and educational infrastructure needs. This should include a procedure for identifying and prioritising educational infrastructure needs and assuring itself that all students and teachers have access to appropriate computing facilities'. The report also stated that parity 'of access to

learning resources for students in different disciplines should be key to the implementation of these actions, drawing on the provisions of the range of emerging strategies'.

Setting appropriate expectations among staff and students

20   One report emphasised the value to institutions of establishing realistic expectations among staff about present and likely future support for the development of learning support resources. In this particular instance, the report noted that in the absence of a resource allocation model, there appeared to be 'some lack of coherence in the planning and allocation of resources for learning support' and 'uncertainty in the allocation of departmental budgets [which rendered] learning support resources particularly vulnerable in times of budget deficit'. The report recommended that the institution should consider taking 'a more strategic approach to the planning and allocation of resources for learning support'.

21   In some of the first 70 reports the notion of setting realistic expectations also extends to the student body. Several reports suggest that institutions should ensure that their students are fully informed about the likely level of learning support resources on offer. In this context, one report drew attention to a perceived variability of expectations among students and recommended that the institution consider 'clarifying the minimum and typical levels of resource provision in different areas in order to manage the expectations of students more effectively'.

22   In the particular case of subject areas such as art and design and architecture, where project work is an important component of the learning process, it is not unusual for students to be expected to provide and fund their own materials. One report recommended that where the materials costs of projects were funded by the students, the institution should consider exploring how students could be given a realistic understanding of the costs that they were likely to incur.

Training for users of learning support resources

23   Part of the process of setting realistic expectations for staff and students might be the provision of information and training to the users of learning support resources. This might include learning and teaching staff providing support to students in the area of study skills, and/or the production of study guides [for example, Royal College of Nursing Institute, 95]. In one institution, the audit report found that considerable use was made of staged inductions to the use of audiovisual and computer resources, in which access to relevant equipment was dependant on the successful completion of each level of training. Such a systematic approach was considered to be a feature of good practice [Cumbria Institute of the Arts, 99]. Similarly, in the case of another institution the support for students in accessing learning support resources was viewed as a feature of good practice [University of Surrey, Roehampton, 75]. Likewise, where particularly careful attention was paid to providing support and information for students this was likely to be identified as a feature of good practice [for example, Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, 127 and 136].

24   At other institutions, the dissemination of information about learning support resources was less well developed. In one case, where students at an institution working with an awarding institution had rights of access to the library at the latter, the report suggested that the former institution should 'review the information

provided and the mechanisms for disseminating that information in order to ensure that students were made aware of their status, access and rights...to facilities under this scheme'.

Monitoring the effectiveness of learning support resources and student feedback

25   Several of the first 70 audits were undertaken in institutions experiencing rapid changes, in either their arrangements or circumstances. In the relevant reports, a common feature is a suggestion to the institution of the value of ensuring that learning support resources are monitored for their continuing sufficiency, relevance and appropriateness. In one such case, while the institution was clearly aware of the limitations of its learning resource provision, the report nonetheless recommended that it should 'manage carefully its learning resources to ensure these are adequate and appropriate' to meet plans for expanding course provision and for widening access. In another case, the audit report noted that the recent growth in student numbers and the development of collaborative arrangements were likely to form challenges to the institution's commitment to provide parity of learning environment for all students. This led into a wider recommendation that it should 'exercise caution in the future development of its collaborative arrangements in order to ensure an appropriate experience of [higher education] for all students engaged in its collaborative provision'.

Learning support resources for e-learning

26   In addition to challenges arising from rising enrolments, other institutional developments may provide the focus for reports to recommend careful monitoring of learning support resources. One such case is the increasing importance some institutions attach to the development of e-learning in their portfolios. In one such institution, the report noted an increasing reliance on e-learning to support teaching, self-study and assessment. In this instance, access to learning materials was constantly available to students through the institution's intranet and via the internet. Also, five specialist staff were 'working on the production of multimedia materials for both computer-aided learning and also for distribution to veterinary practices: a digital image bank of over 1,000 high-quality images had been created'. The approach used to develop and support of these resources was identified as a feature of good practice [The Royal Veterinary College, 112]. At another institution, the relevant audit report identified the 'Interactive Education Unit' as a feature of good practice and saw it as 'exceptional in the breadth and depth of its content and its appropriateness as an interactive learning aid for students at all stages of their studies' [The Institute of Cancer Research, 102-04].

27   The collateral effect of policies for e-learning on students and learning support resources was raised in one audit report. This noted the institution's intentions 'to increase the use of flexible-learning methods' and observed that this 'can result in students having to print more materials'. This was in the context of existing student concerns regarding the costs at the institution of photocopying and printing, and delays for students in printing documents. In this case the report recommended that the institution 'review the availability and cost to students of generating hard copy to support e-modes of learning' and that it should 'reflect upon the impact of a shift towards autonomous learning on the resources for learning, and on the costs borne by students'.

Feedback on learning support resources from students

28   One of the means through which institutions satisfy themselves that their learning resource provision is meeting the needs of students is through the collection of feedback information from them. In general, a review of the first 70 audit reports suggests that those managing learning support resources make impressive attempts to elicit opinions from students. A number of reports contain descriptions of the methods used by institutions to gather feedback. These include the representation of learning support resources staff on programme, departmental, school or faculty-level committees and encompass less formal arrangements such as the provision of 'comments walls' in libraries.

29   Some institutions were praised in the relevant reports for their openness and responsiveness to feedback. Across the reports, comments reported from students and their representatives frequently emphasised the helpfulness of learning support staff. That said, in summarising views expressed in students' written submissions, a number of common themes emerge in the first 70 reports. These included access to books, generally, and key texts at times of peak demand; opening hours for libraries and for access to IT equipment; the reliability of network systems and the appropriateness of teaching rooms for particular programmes of studies.

30   In most cases observations in the students' written submission, such as those above, provided the audit team with an opportunity to explore the relevant institution's responsiveness to the needs of its students. A number of features of good practice were identified. At one institution, the audit report noted a 'general willingness to respond to annual monitoring and other kinds of feedback on the learning environment and to make improvements'. The relevant report observed that the 'good relationships and practical arrangements which exist between members of the Library and staff and students at school level [constituted] a feature of good practice' [University of East Anglia, 111]. More specifically, at another institution one of the libraries 'had identified a need among part-time students (a growing constituency) for a more flexible service that was responsive to the limited opportunities they had to visit the library to borrow books. It had therefore introduced a postal loan service. Student take up of this service [had] been enthusiastic, and this seemed to the [audit] team to be a feature of good practice and worthy of wider notice' [University of Brighton, 100].

31   There were, however, instances in other audit reports where student feedback had not been fully addressed and which gave rise to recommendations. At one institution, there was an apparent lack of awareness of an inconsistency between the quality of service provided in IT and communication, and the needs of staff and students. In this instance, student satisfaction with IT appeared to be patchy in comparison to their more positive views of the library's services; and concerns had been expressed regarding the adequacy of the institution's internal networks. This led to a recommendation that it would be desirable for the institution 'to review its arrangements, independent of [its IT and computing services] for establishing and monitoring the extent to which [they are] meeting the needs of staff and students'.

32   In another case, there had been long-standing user dissatisfaction with library opening hours, and with the number of staff on hand to assist students. The provision of software to allow users to issue books to themselves had only been made possible

through a grant from an external source, despite repeated requests for the library budget to be increased. The relevant report recommended that the institution should 'consider whether it has been sufficiently responsive, at institutional level and especially in terms of its processes for the allocation of resources, to the long-standing concerns of some library users'.

Conclusion

33   Taken together it is clear from the first 70 audit reports that, in most cases, institutions' learning support resources are making a signal contribution to the provision of higher education. Likewise, it seems clear that in most institutions learning support resources are subject to appropriate institutional monitoring and strategic management. The reports suggest that institutions have generally established reliable means to monitor how such resources are used and to confirm that they match the needs of their academic portfolios. In most institutions it also seems clear that considerable efforts are made to elicit and use feedback from users and that the work of learning support staff on behalf of users is viewed positively by the latter.

Virtual learning environments (VLEs)

34   According to the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), a VLE is 'an electronic system that can provide on-line interactions of various kinds that can take place between learners and tutors, including on-line learning'. The same source defines the main features of a VLE as follows:

- 'Controlled access to a curriculum that has been mapped to elements (or "chunks") that can be separately assessed or recorded

- Tracking of student activity and achievement against these elements to allow tutors to set up a course with materials and activities to direct, guide and monitor learner progress

- Support of on-line learning, including access to learning support resources, assessment and guidance. The learning support resources may be self-developed, professionally authored or purchased materials

- Communication between the learner, the tutor and other specialists to provide support and feedback for learners, as well as peer group communications that build a sense of group identity and community of interest

- Links to other administrative systems, both in-house and externally'.

35   In recent years commercial and internally developed VLE systems have been introduced by a significant number of institutions of higher education, in which they operate under a range of different titles. It is clear from the first 70 audit reports that many institutions are planning, developing and introducing VLEs, frequently after extensive consultations with both students and staff. It is similarly clear from the published audit reports that their introduction is generally regarded as a positive step by staff and students, and that it has been carefully managed and sufficiently supported.

36   Consideration of the published audit reports shows the following features of good practice relating to VLEs:

- the work of the [On-line Study Centre] in supporting distance-learning students following programmes based in the School [School of African and Oriental Studies, paragraph 299 v; paragraph 178]

- the creative ways in which some schools use the University's intranet, email arrangements and virtual learning environments to support teaching and learning…[University of East Anglia, paragraph 275, vii; paragraph 198]

- the development by the University of its Learn VLE, which is closely tailored to its teaching and learning needs, and provides easy access for students to authoritative and up-to-date information, and the staff development activities it has undertaken to encourage staff to make use of the VLE [Loughborough University, paragraph 317 iii; paragraphs 106, 121 and 253]

- the provision of staffcentral as a comprehensive electronic information base for staff... [University of Brighton, paragraph 255 vii; paragraph 99]

- [the] approach to the use of technology supported learning, including the [Wolverhampton On-Line Framework] [University of Wolverhampton, paragraph 295 bullet 4; paragraphs 129, 137, 147, 184 and 195].

In addition, there have been several recommendations linked to the introduction and/or use of VLEs.

The introduction of VLE systems

37   The introduction of VLEs has been frequently noted in institutional audit reports. This has prompted both the identification of features of good practice, and recommendations for action, largely in the areas of the planning and implementation of such systems and in their continued support. Prior to introducing a VLE, some institutions have undertaken extensive planning and consultation exercises. These have been designed to ensure that the introduction of the VLE is closely aligned with the needs of both students and staff. In one institution, where the report found that the introduction of the VLE had been supported by staff development and training, this 'systematic work' in developing and supporting the VLE was identified as a feature of good practice [Loughborough University, 106, 121 and 253]. Likewise, in the same case, students commented positively on the access to 'authoritative and up-to-date' information available to them.

38   In another institution, the ways in which its VLE could be used 'for example: as a repository for learning materials, for exchange of views and information, and for the use of interactive learning resources' was identified as a feature of good practice. In the same instance some academic and study skills support was also being offered through the VLE and there were also plans for it to be used to deliver learning materials for distributed learning programmes [University of Wolverhampton, 129, 137, 147, 184 and 195]. In this particular case the report was able to record that students expressed solid satisfaction with their experience of the University's VLE.

The use of developed VLE systems

39   As indicated above, students have frequently responded to the introduction of VLEs with enthusiasm. Where the coverage of the VLE has been extended to staff, this appears also to have received a good response. In one institution, for example, the view of students was that it was an asset to their learning. A version of this VLE had been extended to staff where it had been similarly well received. In this instance the audit report found that the implementation of this system had been 'well-handled' and that its use as a means of disseminating information to staff was a feature of good practice [University of Brighton, 99].

40   The first 70 audit reports do, however, provide some instances where deployments of VLEs have been less successful. In one case, for example, the institution itself had come to the view that preparations and support for the introduction of a VLE had not been adequate. More particularly, it observed that it had 'not anticipated accurately the level of demand for the VLE from both staff and students, and that forward planning had been inadequate with regard to its use or support when introduced'. In this case the report found a 'clear need for policies, strategies and guidelines to be developed and implemented which address the design, approval, delivery, and QME of all provision delivered through distance learning methods and including VLE technology'. The report recommended that the institution 'take a strategic overview of the development and use of the VLE technologies'.

41   The need to develop a strategic view when introducing and deploying a VLE was identified in another audit report where, although usage of the VLE was high, the audit report suggested that the quality assurance structure that underlay it could be improved. While the institution itself saw that the VLE 'had the potential to support distance-learning programmes or modules with little face-to-face contact', the report found that the committee with responsibility for distance learning was unsure of the institution's policy and could not ensure that 'adequate resources would be made available'. The report regarded this as significant for the implementation of the system and recommended that the institution should 'implement a coherent strategic framework for the delivery and management of e-learning' and, in particular, the further development of the VLE.

42   At another institution, the audit team found that the development of the VLE had been intended to support a learning technologies strategy, with the intention that all programmes and modules offered across the institution would have a presence. By the time of the audit, the deployment of the VLE had begun, but progress had fallen behind schedule, with the consequence that implementation across the institution had become patchy. In addition, some students were not well aware of the institution's intentions in relation to the development of the VLE. This led the audit report to recommend that the institution 'give consideration to the development of a clear policy to progress the implementation of, and support for, the VLE such that it is embedded' throughout the institution.

43   The matter of support mechanisms for flexible learning methods is noted elsewhere in this paper with respect to another report, which noted the need for an institution to be aware that the increased use of flexible learning methods can 'result in students having to print more materials' for study in comparison with courses and programmes supported more conventionally. The same point might be made in connection with VLEs.

44   One report discussed the institution's rationale for developing two separate VLEs, prompted by doubts about the wisdom of this strategy which had been expressed in the students' written submission. While the report recognised that both systems were 'user friendly and easy to navigate', it suggested that the institution should bear in mind the needs of those students, such as combined honours students, who studied in more than one area of the institution and therefore might need to use both VLEs.

Conclusion

45   VLEs have been introduced by many of the institutions where the first 70 institutional audits were conducted. In general, VLEs appear to have been successfully implemented and to have been warmly welcomed by students. In many cases, the audit reports show that the development and deployment of VLEs by institutions has been undertaken meticulously, with close attention to the technical and staff development issues that their implementation raises. In a few cases, however, reports have recommended that the development of a VLE, and its likely impact across the institution, be subject to more careful and strategic consideration.

Appendix 1 - The institutional audit reports

2002-03

Bath Spa University College, May 2003
College of St Mark and St John, May 2003
Cumbria Institute of the Arts, March 2003
Institute of Education, University of London, March 2003
London Business School, May 2003
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, March 2003
Middlesex University, March 2003
Newman College of Higher Education, May 2003
Norwich School of Art and Design, May 2003
Rose Bruford College, May 2003
Royal Academy of Music, March 2003
Royal College of Art, March 2003
Royal College of Music, May 2003
Royal College of Nursing Institute, July 2003
Royal Northern College of Music, May 2003
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, April 2003
The Royal Veterinary College, February 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
University College Chichester, February 2003
University of Cambridge, April 2003
University of Lincoln, May 2003

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Anglia Polytechnic University, May 2004
Aston University, April 2004
Bournemouth University, March 2004
Brunel University, May 2004
Coventry University, April 2004
The Nottingham Trent University, May 2004
King's College London, June 2004
Loughborough University, March 2004
Open University, March 2004
Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, December 2003
Royal Agricultural College, December 2003
St Martin's College, Lancaster, December 2003
The Institute of Cancer Research, March 2004
The London Institute, April 2004
The Manchester Metropolitan University, June 2004
University of Bath, October 2003
University of Birmingham, April 2004
University of Bradford, November 2003
University of Brighton, May 2004

University of Bristol, April 2004
University of Buckingham, November 2003
University of Central Lancashire, April 2004
University of Durham, February 2004
University of East Anglia, January 2004
University of Essex, November 2003
University of Exeter, November 2003
University of Greenwich, June 2004
University of Keele, May 2004
University of Kent, March 2004
University of Lancaster, June 2004
University of Leeds, March 2004
University of Liverpool, February 2004
University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, November 2003
University of Oxford, March 2004
University of Portsmouth, April 2004
University of Reading, May 2004
University of Salford, March 2004
University of Sheffield, November 2003
University of Southampton, December 2003
University of Surrey, Roehampton, December 2003
University of Sussex, May 2004
University of Warwick, March 2004
University of Wolverhampton, March 2004
University of York, December 2003
Wimbledon School of Art, May 2004
Writtle College, February 2004

Appendix 2 - Reports on specialist institutions

Royal College of Art, March 2003
Royal College of Music, May 2003
Institute of Education, University of London, March 2003
London Business School, May 2003
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, March 2003
Royal Academy of Music, March 2003
The Royal Veterinary College, February 2003
The School of Pharmacy, University of London, May 2003
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, April 2003
The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College, May 2003
Cumbria Institute of the Arts, March 2003
Newman College of Higher Education, May 2003
Norwich School of Art and Design, May 2003
Royal College of Nursing Institute, July 2003
Royal Northern College of Music, May 2003
Rose Bruford College, May 2003
Trinity College of Music, May 2003
Trinity and All Saints College, May 2003
The Institute of Cancer Research, March 2004
The London Institute, April 2004
Royal Agricultural College, December 2003
Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, December 2003
Wimbledon School of Art, May 2004
Writtle College, February 2004

Appendix 3 - Projected titles of *Outcomes...* papers

In most cases, *Outcomes...* papers will be no longer than 15 sides of A4. QAA retains copyright in the *Outcomes...* papers, but as noted earlier, they may be freely used, with acknowledgement.

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

Title	Publishing date (provisional)
Overview	April 2005
Programme specifications	April 2005
External examiners and their reports	April 2005
Staff support and development arrangements	October 2005
Student representation and feedback	November 2005
Programme monitoring arrangements	January 2006
Assessment of students	January 2006
Learning support resources (including virtual learning environments)	January 2006
Validation, approval and periodic review	January 2006
Academic advice, guidance and supervision	March 2006
Progression and completion statistics	March 2006
Subject benchmark statements	March 2006
The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland	March 2006
Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and standards	March 2006
Collaborative provision	March 2006
International students and their support	March 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* 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 documents published on QAA's 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.