

**Outcomes from institutional audit  
Arrangements for joint, combined and  
multidisciplinary programmes**

**Second series**



**Sharing good practice**

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### Summary

There are references to joint, combined and multidisciplinary programmes in more than 40 of the 59 institutional audit reports published between November 2004 and August 2006. Although many such programmes lead to honours bachelor's degrees there are also numerous references in the reports to joint and multidisciplinary programmes that lead to taught postgraduate awards.

The audit reports show that a basic requirement for the successful operation of joint and combined programmes is a shared understanding among those delivering them and those studying through them of the structures, policies and procedures that govern them. The reports also show that another (linked) requirement is that the contributing subject areas share information in a timely manner to ensure that students know what is expected of them, whether in terms of their assessed work or their timetable. Many of the recommendations linked to joint and combined programmes in the reports derive from difficulties experienced in aspects of either or both of these areas.

Joint and combined programmes tend to be offered in one of two ways: modular schemes and joint and combined programmes that result from two or more departments (or groups within departments) agreeing to work together. The audit reports show that each arrangement has its advantages and limitations: large modular schemes provide opportunities for clear rules for assessment and accumulating credit towards an award, but can leave students isolated. Large modular schemes can also be difficult to review and modify in their entirety. Joint and combined programmes operated between small groups of staff or departments can make for easy staff and student contacts (though not in all cases), but monitoring and reviewing such programmes on a consistent basis can be difficult, as can ensuring consistent treatment for students.

Some audit reports show how institutions were using internally generated data and statistics to improve their understanding of their joint and combined programmes. In a number of cases, however, reports note deficiencies - sometimes amounting to absences - in institutions' collection of data and statistics for joint and combined programmes.

Several audit reports comment on assessment and classification arrangements for students following joint and combined programmes. At the time of their respective audits, some institutions were considering changes to their assessment regulations to ensure greater fairness towards students studying for joint and combined awards. In a few cases, reports noted that external examiners had expressed concerns that classification rules could make it less likely that students following joint and combined programmes would achieve a first class award.

Many audit reports commented on the particular importance of academic and personal advice and guidance for students following joint and combined programmes. Several reports describe good practice and innovative schemes to ensure that these students have access to academic and personal support. Comments and recommendations in rather more reports relate to difficulties students on joint and combined programmes had experienced in securing academic and personal advice and guidance.

### Preface

An objective of institutional audit is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high-quality in teaching and learning'. To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of its institutional audits, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) produces short working papers that describe features of good practice and summarise recommendations from the audit reports. Since 2005 these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (hereafter, *Outcomes...*). The first series of these papers drew on the findings of the audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004. This paper is based on the findings of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006. It includes a brief section at the end of the paper comparing its key features with those of its predecessor in the first series of *Outcomes...* papers.

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 8, 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 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 and second series of *Outcomes...* papers can be found at Appendix 3 (page 24).

As noted above, this second series of *Outcomes...* papers is based on the 59 institutional audit reports published by August 2006 and the titles of papers are in most cases the same as their counterparts in the first series of *Outcomes...*. Like the first series of *Outcomes...* papers, those in the second 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 the QAA website and cited, with acknowledgement.

### Introduction and general overview

1 This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 as they relate to programmes of studies leading to joint honours, combined honours, multidisciplinary awards and taught postgraduate programmes that share some or all of their features. For ease of reference (and to include taught postgraduate programmes), the term 'joint and combined programmes' is used throughout this paper rather than 'joint and combined honours'. A note on the methodology used to produce this and other *Outcomes...* papers can be found at Appendix 4 (page 26).

### How the terms 'joint', 'combined' and 'multidisciplinary' as applied to programmes and provision are used in the audit reports

2 When staff in higher education refer to 'joint awards' or 'joint honours' it is most often in connection with undergraduate awards and to provision offered by a single institution that includes studies in two or more subject areas and leads to an award where the title indicates that two or more subjects have been studied. For example, BA (Hons) Subject A and Subject B, or BA (Joint Hons) Subject A and Subject B. In such cases, individual institutions may have developed rules or custom and practice that allows them to distinguish whether the same volume and level of study has been undertaken in each of the subjects studied, or whether one was the 'major' subject and another the 'minor'. For example, where an award title is BA (Hons) Subject A **and** Subject B, the intention can be to convey the understanding that there has been parity in the time devoted to each subject.

3 In institutions where the award title is something like BSc or BA (Hons) Subject A **with** Subject B, the intention may be to convey to staff and students that the study of Subject A formed the 'major' part of the student's studies. In some institutions, however, such a distinction may be made by using terms in the award title such as 'minor', for example: BA (Hons) Subject A, Subject (minor). As these instances indicate, references in the audit reports to joint and combined programmes are most frequently encountered in connection with undergraduate provision, although there is much evidence, often in the discipline audit trail sections of the reports, of a significant number of joint and combined subjects and multidisciplinary studies in taught postgraduate programmes.

4 References in the audit reports to the terms 'combined award' or 'combined honours' mostly refer to undergraduate programmes of study where students have studied more than two subjects. As with the terms 'joint award' or 'joint honours', where students have studied one subject or a combination of subjects in greater depth, or taken more modules or courses in one or more subjects, institutions often seek to indicate this through the title of the award conferred on the student. For example: BSc Combined Honours, Subject A, Subject B, Subject C.

5 The award and programme titles discussed above make plain their character through the use of the term 'joint' or 'combined' in the award title. Discussions in the audit reports show, however, that many other programmes (particularly in vocational areas) are multidisciplinary. Hence, many of the programmes explored through the discipline audit trails that do not have the terms 'joint' or 'combined' in their titles

nonetheless partake of some or all of the features (and challenges) encountered in the management of a joint or combined programme. From the reports those challenges can be summarised as successfully managing learning opportunities across internal institutional boundaries (departmental, school, faculty or campus), and ensuring equivalence in the difficulty of the tasks set for students in different subjects, the volume of work required of them and the level of the intended learning outcomes. The significance of the challenges may be judged by the fact that in the reports there are substantially more recommendations than features of good practice linked to joint and combined programmes.

### Trans-institutional programmes and provision

6 This *Outcomes...* paper is devoted to discussing topics linked to the management of learning opportunities and the academic standards of joint and combined programmes offered by single institutions. There is, however, a second type of provision to which the term 'joint award' (sometimes 'dual award') can be attached in the audit reports: provision offered jointly by two or more higher education institutions, each with their own degree awarding powers, within a single programme framework. Such programmes may be at undergraduate level but there are also several references in the reports to taught postgraduate programmes offered by two or more institutions. Trans-institutional and multidisciplinary programmes will be the focus of a future QAA publication.

### 'Joint', 'combined' and 'multidisciplinary' programmes and provision in the Handbook for institutional audit: England

7 The *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002) and the further guidance QAA provided for its audit teams in the form of the template for the institutional audit report did not provide specific guidance on the information the teams should gather and examine in connection with joint, dual or combined programmes. More than two-thirds of the 59 institutional audit reports published by August 2006 do, however, refer in some way to institutions' arrangements to provide and support joint and combined programmes, and the students who follow them, which shows the prominence of these programmes in institutions' work overall.

### Features of good practice

8 Features of good practice linked to the provision of programmes of study leading to joint, combined and multidisciplinary awards in single institutions can be found in three institutional audit reports. They include:

- the high level of staff commitment to student support, in particular at programme and module level [including 'Combined students'] [University of Derby, paragraph 294, bullet 3; paragraphs 145, 158 and 159, especially paragraph 158]
- the professional commitment of academic staff in providing a high level of support for students [including joint honours students] [University of Teesside, paragraph 219 iii; paragraphs 100, 128 and 140, especially paragraph 140]
- the opportunities for widening participation afforded by delivery of the University's programmes by its own staff through the Network of Hope colleges [for programmes 'mainly within the BA/BSc Combined Studies programme'] [Liverpool Hope University College, paragraph 236 iii; paragraphs 12 and 105, especially paragraph 12].

### Themes

9 For the purposes of this paper, the material in the audit reports that relates to institutions' arrangements for joint combined and multidisciplinary programmes has been analysed under the following themes:

- overall quality and academic standards frameworks for joint and combined programmes
- approval for joint and combined programmes
  - the use of external reference points in the approval of new joint and combined programmes (including *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*; *QAA's Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*; subject benchmark statements; and programme specifications)
- monitoring joint and combined programmes
- periodic review of joint and combined programmes
  - data for internal management and Teaching Quality Information
- assessment and degree classification arrangements applied in joint and combined programmes
  - external examiners and joint and combined programmes
- academic and personal support for students following joint and combined programmes
  - information for students following joint and combined programmes
  - representation and feedback arrangements for students following joint and combined programmes
- collaborative arrangements and joint and combined programmes.

### Overall quality and academic standards frameworks for joint and combined programmes

10 There is detailed information about the quality and academic standards arrangements operated by single institutions for joint and combined programmes in more than a fifth of the audit reports. This indicates that institutions generally offer such provision in one of two forms. In one, the content of the programmes is delivered within a modular framework, often - but not always - institution-wide, that sets out norms such as the study time required to acquire a specified amount of academic credit; how students' attainments are to be measured and recorded; how these are to be aggregated for an academic award; and how the title of that award is to be determined.

11 Where the audit reports comment on institution-wide modular schemes, they give a clear impression of the complexity of their design and operation. With only a few exceptions, however, the reports expressed the view that such schemes are well-embedded in their individual institutions and that the complexity of their management arrangements matches the complexity of the task. Several reports noted that such modular frameworks had been in operation in the relevant institutions for a considerable time. Comments in several reports show that some institution-wide schemes were continuing to benefit from incremental adjustments to address weaknesses or operational difficulties as they had arisen.

12 In the other form of provision, there are joint and combined programmes that have originated at departmental (or equivalent) level and continued to be operated at that level or by a faculty immediately above, rather than centrally. Several audit reports that described such departmentally-based joint and combined programmes show that they and the students that follow them can be subject to individually devised regulations that can deviate in some respects from institutions' own requirements.

13 Commenting on institutional arrangements where authority for the operation of quality assurance arrangements has been delegated to faculties, schools or departments, some audit reports remarked on the need for them to be accompanied by effective arrangements to keep the centre informed, including on the progress of students following joint and combined programmes. Comments in one audit report summed up what audit teams appeared to regard as the basic requirements for success in offering and managing joint and combined programmes. In this case the institution had adopted a devolved management model. It had identified that under this model 'there was a tendency for each [of its faculties] to develop its own systems and responses'. To offset this tendency, and to 'support the devolved framework', it had set up a number of central groups, including a 'Joint Honours Administrators Group'. Notwithstanding these developments, the audit report identified that **a shared understanding of the institution's 'structures, policies and procedures' was needed for the effective 'management of academic quality and standards'** [emphasis added]. Recommendations in several reports were linked to the need for institutions to improve the quality and timeliness of the information available to them about their joint and combined programmes.



14 Several audit reports on institutions offering joint and combined programmes (in either of the two forms described in paragraphs 10 and 12) noted that the institutions were reviewing their overall frameworks for such provision. In several cases such reviews were more-or-less explicitly linked to achieving greater fairness in the way in which undergraduate students following joint and combined programmes were supported, represented and assessed.

### Approval of new joint and combined programmes

15 The approval of new programmes and provision in general terms is covered in the *Outcomes...* paper on *Programme approval and review*. With respect to the development of new 'pathways' or ensembles of modules and/or courses within a joint or combined programme, it is worth noting that where these arise from the identification of one or more new combinations of existing modules or courses, or groups of them, the degree of curriculum and other preliminary development required may be substantially less than for a programme where the contents have to be developed from scratch. In this connection more than one audit report observed that the particular institution's arrangements had made it possible for new programmes to be constituted rapidly, by combining existing modules. In one case the institution regarded such proposals as 'variations on existing programmes' and was intending to introduce 'lighter touch' approval arrangements for such cases by waiving its normal requirements for an external element in the process and by requiring a reduced set of documentation. In this instance the report cautioned the institution to retain its capacity for central oversight in order, as another report put it, to limit 'curriculum drift'.

16 One audit report made the point that following approval of joint and combined programmes, institutions may need to keep a close eye on how they work in practice, and be ready to intervene to address unforeseen shortcomings. In this particular case, in the process of embedding an institution-wide modular framework, variations in the numbers of credits assigned to modules and the number of modules to be studied at different stages in a programme had come to the institution's notice, although it had attempted to limit the degree of variation permitted through publishing guidelines. The report noted that 'the [credit] weighting [given] for the same module may vary for individual students, dependent either on the stage at which they are taking it, or on the degree programme for which they are registered'. The report pointed to the potential for 'the lack of consistency for students on these modules [to] have an impact on the motivation of individual students' and urged the institution not to delay in tackling this matter.

### Use of external reference points in approval of new joint and combined programmes

17 There are comments in about a third of the audit reports on how institutions had used external reference points when developing and approving new joint and combined programmes. Only a few reports, however, referred to QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* and none included any detail. In general, comments in the reports are associated with a

discussion of the institution's chosen approach to constructing programme specifications and most detailed comments derive from the discipline audit trails. Most comments relating to external reference points in the reports noted that institutions check alignment or consistency with their guidance as part of the formal approval process for new programmes, including joint and combined programmes. This appears to be done through scrutiny of the draft programme specification to ensure that modules and subjects refer to subject benchmark statements and that the programme as a whole is referenced to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). In a few cases there are also references to institutional arrangements to ensure that the requirements of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies are considered in the process of approving new joint and combined programmes.

18 There are comments that link both subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ to programme specifications in about a quarter of the reports that discuss joint and combined programmes, several of which are linked to recommendations. One report, for example, commented on the need for the institution to ensure that the intended learning outcomes of subject-specific provision in joint and combined programmes is linked to the relevant subject benchmark statement(s) 'as part of a more systematic institutional-level approach to the management of joint...degree programmes'. Overall, almost all references to the FHEQ in the reports simply observed that in the programme specifications seen by the particular audit team, levels of attainment had been 'appropriately' mapped on to the FHEQ.

19 As part of each discipline audit trail, audit teams checked the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the relevant **programme specification(s)** to establish whether they included references to relevant subject benchmark statements as well as programme aims and the intended learning outcomes students were expected to attain. One report explained the particular relevance of programme specifications for joint and combined programmes, where it considered that mapping intended learning outcomes from module-level to programme-level - together with the associated assessment tasks - helped to ensure that there was clear responsibility for each component within the relevant joint honours programmes, and to ensure equity of learning opportunities for the students following such a programme. In this particular case the report identified that programme specifications were not always used effectively to this end.

### Monitoring joint and combined programmes

20 There are comments on monitoring arrangements for joint and combined programmes in several audit reports. These show that annual monitoring of joint and combined programmes often draws on information from all the subject areas involved. A recurring theme in several reports is the design of arrangements to ensure that institutions do not lose sight of developments in their joint and combined programmes. For example, one institution had directed its faculty boards to 'ensure that joint and combined honours programmes continue to be a specific feature of annual review', while another institution had introduced the device of a single report, covering all joint honours programmes and produced by a joint honours programme board. Several reports, however, commented that even with

such devices, variable implementation by subject teams, departments or schools of institutional requirements had weakened their effectiveness.

21 Several reports noted the difficulties that monitoring undergraduate joint and combined programmes could represent for particular institutions. In one case, a report noted the institution's practice of requiring the production of a monitoring report for each joint honours combination, which entailed considerable repetition. In this case the report also noted that the standard form used by the institution to capture information on joint and combined programmes did not seek an 'evaluative discussion'. Separate recommendations urged the institution to make changes to its monitoring and module evaluation arrangements and its information systems to 'enable staff to make optimum use of relevant data for comprehensive and well-informed evaluation, at both module and programme levels'.

22 Another report found that an institution's work to monitor the academic health of its joint and combined provision had encountered two difficulties: the first was late or incomplete reporting from individual subject areas, the second had arisen from the decision to present information in annual monitoring reports on a subject-by-subject basis. The report noted that this had produced monitoring reports for the institution that tended to focus on the individual subjects rather than the joint and combined programmes of which they were a part. The report recommended that the institution introduce 'measures to secure a greater degree of critical analysis throughout its annual monitoring process, and more consistency in the annual monitoring reports from schools' so that 'annual monitoring makes a more effective contribution to strategic decision-making and institution-wide implementation'.

23 In another case, it appeared to the audit team that joint and combined programmes lay outside the institution's annual monitoring arrangements altogether. Annual monitoring information for individual modules was expected to be provided for departments but this was not always the case, and the omissions included modules contributing to joint and combined programmes. In this case the report recommended that the institution should incorporate joint and combined programmes into its existing monitoring arrangements 'to support the equitable treatment of students'. The report also recommended that the institution should ensure that its requirements for the submission of timely monitoring reports from modules were adhered to.

### Periodic review of joint and combined programmes

24 The audit reports show that in many institutions periodic review processes were subject rather than programme-based and that in some circumstances this could cause components of joint and combined programmes to be either over or under-reviewed. To avoid either eventuality, one institution had introduced quinquennial periodic review for all joint and combined programmes, to be carried out at the institutional level by a 'Programme Review Steering Group'. As part of these reviews each contributing department was required to 'identify such issues as complementarity or overlap of syllabus, and issues relating to recruitment, progression and achievement'.

25 As noted previously in paragraph 15, institutional frameworks that facilitate the combination of modules from different disciplines and subjects can ease the rapid development of new programmes, pathways and award titles. In one case, an audit report described the circumstances that had arisen when a large modular scheme had had to be reviewed and re-validated after its prescribed five years of operation. As part of its general arrangements the institution had adopted the device of a 'Combination Planning Panel' to scrutinise proposals for new joint and combined programmes to 'ensure that the rationale is sound, the proposal is coherent and does not entail duplication, and the resource implications have been fully considered'. The report found that the volume of this work had led to some joint awards being reapproved without the formation of a Combination Planning Panel and recommended that the institution should attend to this in the interests of carrying out its own procedures in the way it intended and in a more timely fashion.

### **Data for internal management and Teaching Quality Information**

26 The *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* provided an opportunity to report on the progress of institutions in their provision of information for the Teaching Quality Information website (now, with some modifications, hosted on the UNISTATS website: [www.unistats.com](http://www.unistats.com)). Audit reports were also expected to comment on the nature and effectiveness of institutions' arrangements for collecting data and statistics on their students to enable them to track their progress and achievements. These matters are discussed in more detail in the *Outcomes...* paper on *Progression and completion statistics*.

27 Comments in the audit reports on the use of data and statistics for managing the quality and academic standards of joint and combined programmes are generally consistent with comments elsewhere in the reports on their use for managing other programmes. In several cases, reports noted that institutional management information systems had experienced difficulties with holding data for joint and combined programmes and generating statistics. One report stated that the difficulty of recording progression and other data for students on joint and combined programmes had prevented an institution undertaking cohort analysis. The report recommended that the institution should undertake more systematic data analysis 'to help assure standards'.

28 There are instances in other reports, however, of institutions using their capacity to gather and analyse data and statistics on their joint and combined programmes to advantage. One report noted that an institution expected programmes (including joint and combined programmes) to be monitored at school level, and through its 'Policy and Planning Unit' provided a 'quantitative data set' to support this work. In one school the report found that not only had this data been used to monitor student progression and achievement by programme but that it had also been used to examine 'the extent of student migration between joint honours and single honours degree schemes within the school'. Another report noted that the institution's systems to collect and analyse data on students enrolled on its combined honours programme had enabled it to pinpoint and address difficulties in particular 'fields' and in the combined honours scheme as a whole. A further report noted, in passing, how an institution's tools for collecting data and producing statistics had

successfully enabled it to identify discrepancies between the achievements recorded for single honours and joint and combined honours students, and to begin to consider how to tackle this.

### **Assessment and degree classification arrangements applied in joint and combined programmes**

29 Assessment and classification arrangements for students following joint and combined programmes are touched on briefly in the second series *Outcomes...* paper on *Assessment of students*. This notes that where institutions operate two or more different methods for classifying honours degrees, students who follow joint or combined programmes may experience significant variations in the way their achievements in each subject or other area of their studies contributes to their overall award, with the potential for them to be disadvantaged [*Assessment of students*, paragraphs 16 and 19]. Comments in the audit reports on arrangements for assessment and examination boards are discussed with arrangements for external examiner arrangements in paragraphs 35-39 of this paper.

30 More than a third of the audit reports that discuss joint and combined programmes refer to the assessment and classification arrangements they employ. With respect to assessment arrangements several reports described aspects of the assessment processes used for students following joint and combined programmes, including how the submission of assessed coursework was handled and students' grades agreed. One report noted, for example, that variations in the way departments applied deadlines for the submission of coursework, and in the way coursework submitted after the deadline was dealt with, could lead to inconsistencies in the way marks for students following joint and combined programmes were treated overall. The report recommended that the institution should develop a consistent approach to coursework deadlines and penalties for late submission.

31 Another audit report identified that in the absence of means to coordinate deadlines for the submission of assignments for students on joint and combined programmes, conflicting deadlines could affect their performance. One report noted that where students on joint and combined programmes were based on one campus and one of their subjects was delivered on another, securing feedback from tutors on the second campus occasionally required more than ordinary persistence. In this case, delays in returning marked work with tutors' feedback to students at the end of their first year led them to complain that they had been forced to choose second year courses and modules on the basis of inadequate information.

32 On the marking process itself, one report commented with reference to an institution-wide modular scheme on the persistence of 'different grading cultures' from subject to subject, and the effect this might have on students following joint and combined programmes. Several reports offered similar comments, to the effect that the process of agreeing grades for work undertaken by joint and combined students (including taught postgraduate students) took place in assessment boards at department or school level, where each department or school might determine its own assessment and classification procedures in ways that were not always open to institutional scrutiny.

33 More than one audit report observed that concern to safeguard the interests of students following joint and combined programmes had been a factor in leading institutions to review the assessment and classification arrangements that they had subsequently required departments to follow. In one case, the situation of joint and combined students with marks that left them on a borderline, between classes, had been identified (including by external examiners) as of particular concern. In several of these cases, however, the audit had found that, notwithstanding the institutions' expectations and guidance, variable implementation at departmental level had weakened the effectiveness of the guidance. In these cases, reports recommended institutions to keep under review the changes they had made to assessment and classification arrangements and their implementation.

34 The first series counterpart to this *Outcomes...* paper considered that assessment and classification arrangements for students following joint and combined programmes represented an area where a number of reports had expressed concerns about parity in the way students were treated. Information in the audit reports on which the current paper is based supports that view but also shows in several cases that institutions were moving to address this matter. Several of the reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 noted that the degree classification arrangements and algorithms used by particular institutions had the effect of making it less likely that students following joint and combined programmes would achieve first class honours awards than their peers following other programmes. In several of these cases the possibility that joint and combined honours students were receiving inequitable treatment had been raised by external examiners and, in one case, by students.

### **External examiners and joint and combined programmes**

35 The ways in which institutions and external examiners work together to safeguard the academic standards of awards overall and more particularly for joint and combined programmes are outlined in the *Outcomes...* paper on *External examiners and their reports* (especially paragraphs 16, 31, 37 and 38).

36 From the audit reports it appears that some institutions operate systems of single-tier examination or assessment boards, with a separate board being convened for each joint or combined honours programme. Where this is the case, one institution had adopted the practice for joint and combined programmes of appointing an additional external scrutineer or 'assessor' to report to the institution on the 'reliability and integrity of the degree awarding process' for students following joint and combined programmes. In another institution, however, the device of a single-tier assessment board for joint and combined programmes had been combined with an arrangement whereby responsibility for operating and servicing each board rotated between the contributing departments. This was an arrangement that the institution itself had identified as giving rise to an unacceptable degree of variability and proposed to amend.

37 From the audit reports considered here, it seems that rather more institutions operate some form of hierarchical system of assessment boards for their joint and combined programmes than operate single tier arrangements. Several reports described how, for tiers of assessment boards, the marks achieved by students in an

individual subject or discipline are agreed by staff in that subject and monitored or moderated by an external examiner with expertise in the area. Agreed marks are then passed to a higher-level board, with responsibility for aggregating the marks of students following joint or combined programmes and determining their progression status or, for undergraduates, the class of their honours award. It also appears to be the case that where there are tiers of boards most institutions also appoint one or more external examiners to the higher-level board.

38 One audit report described how the institution had developed guidelines to examination boards on methods for classification of students 'to ensure that students on joint programmes are considered as a cohort in their own right'. Another institution, following receipt of critical comments on classification arrangements for joint and combined students from several external examiners, had directed its schools to specify for joint and combined programmes which degree classification algorithm applied to the conversion of marks to classes; where the marks boundary for identifying a candidate as borderline fell; and how the degree classification of such borderline candidates would be decided. In this case, the audit report found that some schools had not followed this guidance and the report had recommended that the institution should 'maintain effective monitoring of assessment schemes for joint honours programmes, with particular reference to consistency in the regulations for borderline classifications and the coordination of the scheduling of examination boards where the results of joint honours students are considered'.

39 The responsibilities of external examiners attending higher-level assessment, progression and classification boards for students following joint and combined programmes generally appear to be to monitor the boards' actions to ensure their conformity with the institution's expectations and to report back. Less frequently, some institutions had arranged for one external examiner to speak to the institution on behalf of the external examiners for a joint or combined programme. The robustness of the external examining arrangements for joint and combined programmes may be judged by the fact that a number of audit reports drew on examiners' critical reports when undertaking their scrutinies of assessment and academic standards arrangements for joint and combined programmes (see also paragraph 34).

### **Academic and personal support for students following joint and combined programmes**

40 It should be noted that, taken together, the provision of academic guidance and support and personal support for students following joint and combined programmes attracted more recommendations than other aspects of institutions' arrangements for these students, although features of good practice were identified in several reports. Readers may also wish to refer another *Outcomes...* paper in this series: *Academic guidance, support and supervision and personal support*.

41 Accounts in the audit reports show that most institutions called on their teaching staff to provide both academic support and front line personal support to students following joint and combined programmes, with only a few having separate arrangements for academic and for personal support. Comments in the reports make

it clear that many institutions recognised what one described as the potential for 'students on joint and combined honours programmes...[to]...feel somewhat isolated'. Where one institution had managed to address this difficulty, joint and combined students praised the level of support they received, particularly when choosing from the courses and modules available to them [University of Derby, paragraph 158].

42 Overall, it appears that different institutions had adopted a range of approaches to providing academic and personal support for students following joint and combined programmes. In some cases, different approaches to providing such support could coexist in one institution. Again, in some cases one of the departments or subjects linked to the student was expected to accept responsibility for furnishing them with a personal tutor. Other institutions expected one subject or department to be the principal provider of academic and personal support, with one or more of the student's other subjects also identifying a tutor or contact person to provide support. Another institution had allowed each of its faculties to develop slightly different support systems for students following joint degree programmes while requiring that each student should have access to a named individual for academic support. Under this arrangement, one faculty had chosen to organise peer support for students through tutorial groups moderated by a member of staff. Another faculty in the same institution had chosen to organise tutor groups which included members from each year of the programme, again moderated by a member of staff.

43 Many institutions had identified for themselves that variations in the provision of academic and personal support across departmental and other institutional boundaries had the potential to disadvantage students following joint and combined programmes. Having identified these risks, institutions sought to manage them in various ways. For example, in one institution guidelines were available to determine which department was to assign a personal tutor. In another institution a personal tutor was allocated in the lead discipline with access to a school liaison officer in the second subject area. In other institutions personal tutors or their equivalents were allocated from each department. It was reported in one case, where the latter arrangement had been adopted, that not all students made use of this support and for those who did there was occasional inconsistency and a need for better communication between departments. In one particular case, and as part of a wide-ranging recommendation on developing a strategy for the management of joint and 'with' degree programmes, the audit report suggested that 'the [institution] might see advantage in monitoring the effectiveness of support for these students'.

44 A number of institutions had developed overarching or cross-institution arrangements in order to provide a more consistent level of support for students following joint and combined programmes. As an example, one institution had designated an individual as a 'Common Personal Tutor' to oversee the progress of all those in a particular cohort of joint and combined programme students. The audit report viewed the university's overall approach to student support through its personal tutors, the Common Personal Tutor referred to above, and careers tutors, including - explicitly - its support for joint and combined students as a feature of good practice [University of Teesside, paragraph 140].



45 Several audit reports looked carefully into the kind of comprehensive approaches to supporting students on joint and combined programmes described above. In one case, where the institution had recently reviewed its personal tutor arrangements, a senior committee had 'recommended the adoption of a new set of principles governing the academic support and guidance of undergraduate students'. As part of this development the university had 'invited heads of school...to consider the future model of tutorial support that is most appropriate to the needs of their school, providing that each student, including joint honours and combined students, has a named individual responsible for his/her academic support'. With this permissive arrangement, the report was not clear how the institution would be able to assess the adequacy of the resulting support arrangements for students following joint and combined programmes and address any deficiencies.

46 Another audit report described how the institution had introduced centralised arrangements for supporting students following joint and combined programmes based on a joint honours programme team, across which responsibilities for personal and academic support for students were shared. The size of this particular programme meant that individual programme team members could be supporting 'between 170 and 180 students each'. One consequence, reported by students, was that those seeking personal tutor support could encounter a different tutor each time they attended for assistance or guidance, so that there could be discontinuities in support. On the same programme, some students were also stated to be unaware that personal support was available to them. More generally, students on the programme reported that they felt excluded from 'full access to academic guidance' because they 'did not automatically receive induction materials...were not always invited to briefing events about future module choice and, because they did not automatically appear on lists, they were not always assigned to module groups'. The report recommended that the institution should secure and assure 'an equivalence of student experience for students registered on [its joint honours scheme]'.

47 The audit reports show that in most institutions, students were referred to specialist personal support and academic guidance through a member of the teaching staff, usually expected to be their personal tutor, or an equivalent, such as a 'personal adviser' or a 'personal supervisor'. Hence, the access of individual students to such members of staff could determine their access to a range of institutionally-provided specialist services. In this context the observations above, about the difficulties students following joint and combined programmes can have in gaining access to their personal tutors, are significant.

### **Information for students following joint and combined programmes**

48 From the information in the audit reports it is clear that the greater part of the information published by institutions on their programmes, including joint and combined programmes, was provided by departments to the centre for publication, or was published direct by the department. Several reports found that this information had not always been checked for accuracy before publication. One report found that other than for joint and combined programmes, central checking was working, but that students on joint and combined programmes received much of

their information direct from the separate departments to which they were linked, and that this was not always reliable. In another institution part-time students following joint and combined programmes had experienced poor levels of communication about their programmes.

49 A particular aspect of the provision of information to students following joint and combined programmes concerns the provision of timetables, where poor communication between subjects and departments could lead to timetabling difficulties. In one case, students had been timetabled to attend lectures on different campuses in immediately consecutive sessions. They were reported as being 'vociferous in identifying it as an area for urgent attention'. The report recommended that the institution should 'secure and assure an equivalence of experience for students registered on the [joint honours programme]'. Another report found that some options were not available to students following joint and combined programmes because of timetabling difficulties.

50 In addition to the information described above, a number of audit reports made the point that students following joint and combined programmes needed a clear understanding of the overall framework of their programme, in particular the options available to them and the number of credits needed within each of their disciplines in order to allow them to progress. Even where one institution had sought to publish clearer information on the frameworks within which modules were offered to make up programmes of study leading to named awards, its students continued to find them difficult to navigate and to work with and improvements were recommended. The provision of programme specifications for publication and for students is discussed in paragraph 19 of this paper.

### **Representation and feedback arrangements for students following joint and combined programmes**

51 As in audit reports published since 2006, those published between December 2004 and August 2006 included a section that described and analysed how institutions gathered and acted on feedback information they collected from students, employers and graduates. In this connection, a number of the audit reports considered here commented specifically on such feedback from students following joint and combined programmes.

52 Mechanisms employed by institutions to collect feedback from joint and combined honours students included an explicit requirement for: the presence of combined or joint honours student representation on student-staff committees; the introduction of specific committees for joint programmes offered across departments so that the interests of the programmes and their students did not become lost to view in the institution's predominantly departmentally-based committee arrangements; or a single committee for all joint programmes. Smaller institutions sometimes gathered feedback from students following joint and combined programmes through elected or appointed representatives for each annual cohort. Even where these arrangements had been introduced it was noted in one report that representatives found it difficult to obtain the collective views of other students on joint and combined programmes.

53 Several audit reports made critical observations about representation arrangements for those students studying on joint or combined honours programmes. Typically, such comments encouraged institutions to secure more comprehensive participation in institutional committees and boards by representatives of students following joint or combined programmes. In one institution, for example, the report found that guidance on how to arrange for the participation of students following joint programmes on student-staff committees was unclear, so that the committees sometimes operated without such representation. The context for these comments was supplied by an institution where most students were following single honours degree programmes. In this case the report encouraged the institution to continue to seek ways of ensuring adequate formal representation for joint and combined honours students so as to ensure that their views were appropriately represented.

54 Another report noted that the attendance of students at meetings was not systematically recorded, including at the 'Joint Honours Programme Board of Studies'. On this occasion the report encouraged the institution 'to secure more comprehensive participation in representative structures to facilitate more effective feedback to students', not least to ensure that the views of joint and combined honours students were registered.

55 In another institution, in addition to student representation within the deliberative committee structure, feedback from students had been sought via questionnaires at module, programme and institution-wide levels. The audit report noted however, that even in the latter case, although the experiences of joint honours students were included, matters particular to their circumstances were not separately and directly addressed in the questionnaires. The report encouraged the institution to ensure that the concerns and needs of combined honours students were identified. This formed part of a wider recommendation on the need for appropriately targeted and consistent data processes to support the institution's learning and teaching strategy.

### **Collaborative arrangements and joint and combined programmes**

56 Of the audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006, only one describes a joint and combined programme offered by a single institution through partnership arrangements. In this particular case, the institution had developed a series of partnerships with 'Roman Catholic sixth-form colleges [which] provide venues for distance teaching by [the institution's] staff on programmes also delivered at [its] campuses'. The institution in question had shared none of its academic authority with its partners and its Partnership Committee had retained full authority over the provision. The development of this 'Network of Hope' was viewed in the report as having provided the institution with an effective means of widening participation and as a feature of good practice [Liverpool Hope University College, paragraph 12]. All other references in the reports to joint and combined programmes were to programmes where responsibility for both teaching and making the academic award had been shared between two or more institutions. As noted in paragraph 6, these will be the focus of a future QAA publication.

### **The findings of this paper compared with its counterpart in the first series of *Outcomes... papers***

57 Both this paper and its predecessor discuss:

- approval monitoring and review of joint and combined programmes
- the use of external reference points and programme specifications
- the assessment and classification of undergraduate degrees
- external examiners' reports
- academic support and guidance for students on joint and combined programmes (referred to in the first paper as 'student support and departmental arrangements, including student handbooks and induction')
- student representation
- joint and combined honours degrees in collaborative provision.

58 Overall, the findings of the two papers are very similar. Both emphasise the prominence of joint and combined programmes in institutions' portfolios and the importance, therefore, for the large numbers of students following them that assessment, classification (where relevant) and support arrangements for joint and combined programmes are as robust as possible. Both papers indicate the importance of good communications between the departments and subject teams offering joint and combined programmes and between tutors and students. Both papers also indicate the challenges for institutions and their staff in ensuring that joint and combined programmes are properly integrated into the institutions' overall quality and academic standards arrangements.

### **Conclusions**

59 The prominence and importance of joint and combined programmes in institutions' portfolios can be judged by the volume of the references to them in two-thirds of the audit reports. Likewise, providing the many students following joint and combined programmes with consistent learning opportunities, supported by good quality management arrangements and sound assessment and academic standards arrangements to ensure the value of their awards, is self-evidently important. It is reassuring, therefore, that in the majority of cases, the audit reports show that institutional procedures do ensure that both learning opportunities and academic standards for students following joint and combined programmes are being secured.

60 As with collaborative provision (with the management of which it shares some features) the successful management of joint and combined programmes requires a high level of mutual understanding and communication between students, teaching and support staff. In many joint and combined programmes, the provision of effective academic and personal tutoring and support arrangements for students constitutes the key to their successful progress through the programme. The converse also appears to hold, that where understanding or communication (or, worse, both) are imperfect, students' learning opportunities may be less satisfactory and academic standards arrangements difficult to manage successfully. With respect to academic

standards, several reports make it clear that on rare occasions students on joint and combined programmes can face a higher level of challenge to achieve a given class of award than their peers.

## **Appendix 1 - The institutional audit reports**

### **Note**

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

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

### **2004-05**

City University

Cranfield University

University of Hull

University of Leicester

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

University of Nottingham

The Queen's University of Belfast

University of Surrey

University of Ulster

Goldsmiths College, University of London

Queen Mary, University of London

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

University of London

University College London

Birkbeck College, University of London

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

St George's Hospital Medical School

University of Derby

De Montfort University

University of Gloucestershire  
University of Hertfordshire  
Sheffield Hallam University  
University of Huddersfield  
Kingston University  
London Metropolitan University  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Liverpool John Moores University  
University of Luton<sup>1</sup>  
University of Northumbria at Newcastle  
Oxford Brookes University  
University of Plymouth  
Staffordshire University  
London South Bank University  
University of Sunderland  
University of Teesside  
University of East London  
University of the West of England, Bristol  
University of Westminster  
Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College<sup>2</sup>  
Canterbury Christ Church University College<sup>3</sup>  
University of Chester  
Liverpool Hope University  
University College Winchester<sup>4</sup>  
Henley Management College<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Now the University of Bedfordshire

<sup>2</sup> Now Buckinghamshire New University

<sup>3</sup> Now Canterbury Christ Church University

<sup>4</sup> Now the University of Winchester

<sup>5</sup> Now merged with the University of Reading

**2005-06**

University of Manchester

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

The University of Bolton

Thames Valley University

University of Central England in Birmingham<sup>6</sup>

University of Worcester

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts<sup>7</sup>

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

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<sup>6</sup> Now Birmingham City University

<sup>7</sup> Now part of the University College Falmouth



## **Appendix 2 - Reports on specialist institutions**

### **2004-05**

Birkbeck College, University of London

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

St George's Hospital Medical School

Henley Management College

Harper Adams University College

Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

American InterContinental University - London

### **2005-06**

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

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

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

The first series of papers can be found on QAA's website at [www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement)

#### **Titles**

- Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards
- Progression and completion statistics
- Learning support resources (including virtual learning environments)
- Assessment of students
- Work-based and placement learning, and employability
- Programme monitoring arrangements
- Arrangements for international students
- Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
- Recruitment and admission of students
- External examiners and their reports
- Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports
- Institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education
- Institutions' support for e-learning
- Specialist institutions
- Student representation and feedback
- Academic guidance, support and supervision, and personal support and guidance
- Staff support and development arrangements
- Subject benchmark statements
- The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Programme specifications
- Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degrees programmes

The adoption and use of learning outcomes

Validation and approval of new provision, and its periodic review

The self-evaluation document in institutional audit

The contribution of the student written submission to institutional audit

Institutions' intentions for enhancement

Series 2: concluding overview

## Appendix 4 - Methodology

The analysis of the institutional audit reports uses the headings set out in Annex H of the *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* to subdivide the Summary, main Report and Findings sections of the 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 is taken from the report published on QAA's website and converted to plain text format. The resulting files are checked for accuracy and coded into sections following the template used to construct the institutional audit reports. In addition, the text of each report is tagged with information providing the date the report was published and some basic characteristics of the institution ('base data'). The reports were then introduced into 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 *Outcomes...* papers are compiled by QAA staff and experienced institutional auditors. To assist in compiling the papers, reports produced by QSR N6® are made available to authors to provide a broad picture of the overall distribution of features of good practice and recommendations in particular areas, as seen by the audit teams.

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