



**QAA**

**Outcomes from institutional audit  
Institutions' support for e-learning  
Second series**



**Sharing good practice**

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### Summary

The 59 institutional audit reports considered in this paper were completed after the publication in September 2004 of the second edition of Section 2 of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, which incorporated a revision of the *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning* (1999). The extended title for Section 2 in its revised version, *Collaborative provision, and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* reflected the fact that many flexible and distributed arrangements are supported through information and communications technologies, and that most of the questions that need to be asked, and be answered, about academic management are common to both e-learning and other methods of flexible and distributed learning.

Features of good practice are cited in a number of the audit reports and identify strengths in areas including strategic approaches to the development and implementation of e-learning, the use of virtual learning environments to support flexible and blended learning, and the provision and quality control of e-learning materials. In addition, the introduction of additions or modifications to quality assurance processes for programmes involving e-learning and distance learning is noted with approval in several of the reports.

Rapid development in e-learning took place during the period covered by the audit reports considered in this paper. This is reflected in the number of reports which note that e-learning was regarded as a core activity rather than the preserve of enthusiasts in individual subject areas. Institutions with a relatively long experience of e-learning were found to be in the process of establishing more centralised control of developments and more coordinated approaches to support those involved in the delivery of e-learning and distance learning.

Overall, the reports indicate that institutions are meeting the challenges involved in implementing strategies and policies, resourcing and coordinating projects and initiatives, and identifying and disseminating good practice. In providing staff development opportunities, several institutions have recognised their responsibility to offer training in the pedagogical as well as the technical aspects of e-learning and distance learning.

In general, the reports confirm that students welcome the increased use of e-learning and are appreciative of the quality of material and support that they receive for this form of learning. There are also indications that institutions appreciate the importance of, and the challenges involved in, obtaining feedback from students on their experience of e-learning.

A comparison of the findings of this paper with its counterpart in the first series of *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers show that e-learning, often as part of blended learning, is becoming more embedded within institutions. More institutions are developing appropriate strategies and policies, and there have been improvements in the quality of the virtual learning environments that support e-learning.

### Preface

An objective of institutional audit is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high-quality in teaching and learning'. To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of its institutional audits, QAA produces short working papers, describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the audit reports. Since 2005, these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (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, which compares 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 7, 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 18).

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 the *Outcomes...* papers. 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 QAA's website and cited, with acknowledgement.

## Introduction and general overview

1 This paper is based on a review of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 (see Appendix 1, page 14). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in this second *Outcomes...* series can be found in Appendix 4 (page 20).

2 In recognition of the growth in off-campus provision of programmes of higher education, QAA published the *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning* (the *Guidelines*) in March 1999. In this document, 'distance learning' was taken to mean a way of providing higher education that involves the transfer to the student's location of the materials which form the main basis of study, rather than the student moving to the location of the resource provider. These materials could include 'material on the world-wide web and other electronic or computer-based resources'. In the reports of institutional audits conducted between 2002 and 2006, a section of the main report discussed the assurance of quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods. Many audit reports contain references in this and other sections to e-learning.

3 E-learning is defined by the Joint Information Systems Committee as 'learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology'. It can be employed within a spectrum of activities, from supporting learning as part of a 'blended' approach for on-campus students where traditional face-to-face and e-learning methods are combined, to being the sole means of delivery for some distance-learning students.

4 In September 2004, the second edition of Section 2 of QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, which incorporated a revision of the *Guidelines*, was published to provide a code of good practice for the academic management of collaborative arrangements. It was also intended to serve as a guide to good practice for the academic management of flexible and distributed learning, that is learning delivered, supported and/or assessed through flexible and distributed arrangements, whether in collaboration with a partner or not. The extended title, *Collaborative provision, and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* reflected both the fact that many flexible and distributed arrangements are supported through information and communications technologies, and the decision taken by QAA not to prepare separate guidance on the quality assurance of e-learning. This decision was made on the grounds that most of the questions that need to be asked, and answered, about academic management are common to both e-learning and other methods of flexible and distributed learning.

5 There are sections on the assurance of quality of learning delivered through distributed or distance learning in nearly all of the 59 reports under consideration, although in a few cases it is noted that the relevant institution had little, or none at all, of this type of provision. There are references to e-learning in over three-quarters of the 59 reports. Of those references, more than two-thirds occur in the sections on distance learning, although there are substantial numbers of references under the headings learning support resources and staff support and development. E-learning is also mentioned in the context of discipline audit trails in around one-fifth of the 59 reports.

6 Virtual learning environments (VLEs) are increasingly viewed as essential for the support of e-learning and these are discussed in more detail in *Outcomes from institutional audit: Learning support resources, including virtual learning environments*. In one institutional audit, the management of blended learning, with particular reference to the institution's VLE, was made the subject of a thematic enquiry.

### Features of good practice

7 Consideration of the published institutional audit reports shows the following features of good practice relating to e-learning and distance learning:

- the strategic approach to the development of e-learning which, while recognising the opportunities for students in general, brings particular benefits for distance-learning students through the ability to provide support in an increasingly coordinated way [University of Leicester, paragraph 287 i; paragraph 40]
- the framework for the quality management of distance-learning programmes - particularly in relation to assuring the quality of distance-learning materials, specifying the functions and managing the work of agents, and defining the roles and responsibilities of associate tutors [University of Leicester, paragraph 287 iii; paragraph 121]
- the comprehensive, accurate and accessible information provided to students including the Student Portal which allows seamless access to a variety of e-learning resources [University of Nottingham, paragraph 302 iii; paragraphs 102, 139, 166, 187, 204, 223 and 240]
- the University's coherent and comprehensive strategy for the development and implementation of e-learning [University of Ulster, paragraph 215 iv; paragraph 101]
- the guidelines on quality assurance of, and issues related to, the provision of distance learning produced by the Department of Electronic Engineering and the work of the [Open and Distance Learning] (ODL) Unit more generally [Queen Mary, University of London, paragraph 245 sixth bullet; paragraphs 121 and 159]
- the design, development and utilisation of the University's managed learning environment StudyNet, which offers outstanding potential for the University's planned move towards a pedagogy of blended learning [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 204 v; paragraphs 157 to 165]
- the University's use of its VLE, both as a pedagogical and communications medium, and the plans for its future development [Sheffield Hallam University, paragraph 202 v; paragraph 93]
- its draft e-learning strategy, which maps on to the e-learning framework developed by the Joint Information Systems Committee [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 317 iii; paragraph 137]
- the use made of electronic communication systems, particularly the virtual learning environment to support flexible and blended learning and communicating with students, and Desktop Anywhere [University of Northumbria at Newcastle, paragraph 254 fourth bullet; paragraph 118]

- the commitment to and success of the development and validation of distance learning [Staffordshire University, paragraph 251 viii; paragraphs 127 and 131]
- the provision of the e-Library, which is notable for highly relevant and carefully selected material to support students' learning [Henley Management College, paragraph 213 sixth bullet; paragraph 120]
- the developments in e-learning and the validation and quality control of e-learning materials [University of Bolton, paragraph 196 third bullet; paragraphs 39 and 105].

### Themes

8 A consideration of the features of good practice and recommendations in the institutional audit reports that relate to e-learning and distance learning suggest that the following broad themes merit further discussion:

- approaches to the development of e-learning and distance learning
- support arrangements and resources for e-learning
- quality assurance processes
- student feedback.

### Approaches to the development of e-learning and distance learning

9 Rapid development in learning that uses information and communications technologies took place during the period covered by the 59 institutional audit reports analysed here. Considerable variation in the scale of, and approach to, e-learning and distance learning is noted in the reports. While a few institutions still had little or no such provision, or had been slow to exploit its potential benefits, others were found to have expanded, or be planning to expand, their provision. One institution had been developing extensive e-learning capacity and had at the time of the audit nearly 10,000 students, mainly campus-based, making use of e-learning in their studies. Another institution had around 4,500 students enrolled on e-learning awards and e-learning modules. In one institution, three-quarters of taught postgraduate students were on distance-learning programmes at the time of the audit and in another about half of all students were reported to participate in some form of e-learning. Some institutions were found to have set targets for expansion of e-learning provision: one institution intended all schools to be using e-learning in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes by 2006 and another planned for half of its programmes to be 'web-supplemented', between 20 and 50 per cent to be 'web-dependent' and between 10 and 20 per cent to be delivered completely online within three years.

10 Approaches to the development of e-learning were found, on the whole, to be appropriate to the institution concerned. While some institutions had come to regard e-learning as 'core to University activity' or an 'integral process, rather than a supplementary programme resource', others were found to be taking a more cautious approach. One institution believed there was potential for e-learning to grow, and its estimate of the likely demands of supporting this mode of delivery had led it to initiate an internal thematic review. Another institution had employed consultants to investigate its readiness to progress its e-learning strategy and the risks involved in

doing so. In this case it was reported that an 'appropriately measured approach' was being taken to the introduction of distance-learning methods and that no major development would occur before the issues had been fully addressed.

11 It appears from the audit reports that for several institutions e-learning was seen as a way of complementing, enhancing and supporting existing learning and teaching methods. In several cases, the balance between 'orthodox' teaching methods and e-learning was regarded as something that needed to be kept under review. In one institution, the development of blended learning, defined as 'educational provision where high quality e-learning opportunities and excellent campus-based learning are combined or blended in coherent, reflective and innovative ways so that learning is enhanced and choice increased', was a significant part of the vision formulated by a new Vice-Chancellor. A thematic enquiry undertaken during the audit identified the design, development and utilisation of the institution's VLE as a feature of good practice, which offered outstanding potential for the planned move towards a pedagogy of blended learning [University of Hertfordshire, paragraphs 8, 157 to 165].

12 Some institutions were noted as having relatively long experience of e-learning and distance learning and, at the time of audit, to be in the process of establishing more centralised control of developments. One institution was 'mainstreaming' the management of its distance-learning provision from former 'entrepreneurial centres', and its increasingly coordinated support for distance-learning students was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Leicester, paragraphs 38 to 40; see also 116]. In another institution, an e-learning strategy, initially approved in 2002, had been reviewed with the intention of mainstreaming e-learning in programme delivery by means of a more directed approach than had hitherto been the case.

13 Establishing e-learning as a fundamental part of the mainstream activity of another institution was found to involve setting targets. These included the development of e-learning modules within each programme, providing e-learning opportunities for all students, the significant growth and retention in the number of students engaging in e-learning and extensive staff development. Although the institution had taken steps to streamline its e-learning management and operational structure, the audit report recommended that, in view of the considerable challenges inherent in this mode of delivery, the institution should consider moving to a more centrally coordinated approach to the provision, utilisation and quality assurance of e-learning.

### **Frameworks and strategies for e-learning**

14 The importance of developing an integrated strategic approach and establishing coherent institutional frameworks for the delivery and management of e-learning is made clear in the audit reports. During the period December 2004 to August 2006, several institutions were in the process of reviewing existing e-learning strategies or developing new ones, often incorporated within learning and teaching strategies.

15 Features of good practice were identified in the strategic approach of several institutions. One institution's strategic approach to e-learning recognised the opportunities it provided for students in general, but also noted the particular benefits



it brought for distance-learning students through the ability to provide support in an increasingly coordinated way [University of Leicester, paragraph 40]. Another audit report praised the coherent and comprehensive nature of an institution's e-learning strategy as an example of good practice, both in the design and implementation of new courses and in the supportive frameworks for staff development and quality assurance [University of Ulster, paragraph 101]. It was noted that a third institution demonstrated good practice in the way it mapped its draft e-learning strategy on to that developed as part of the national Joint Information Systems Committee's e-Framework programme, which began in 2005 [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 137]. One further institution the commitment of which to the development and validation of distance learning was identified as a feature of good practice, had established an e-learning policy, claimed to be among the first of its kind, stating the aims and objectives of its use in the institution [Staffordshire University, paragraph 127]. In only one report was attention drawn to the lack of a clearly defined central policy for the exploitation of e-learning methods.

### Support arrangements and resources for e-learning

16 Several institutional audit reports noted that institutions were aware of, and were responding to, the challenges involved in implementing relevant strategies and policies, resourcing and coordinating projects and initiatives, and providing appropriate guidance and support for staff developing and delivering e-learning and distance learning. One institution was found to have recognised the different implications of e-learning for pedagogy, resources, and staff and student expectations and skills. Another was aware that building on its current variable use of e-learning would involve setting specific targets, supported by continued investment in both technology and staff development.

### VLEs

17 There is a general recognition in the audit reports of the central importance of VLEs for the effective delivery of e-learning. It was noted in one report that, although the institution's e-learning was based around a VLE, the use of the VLE was uneven and there appeared to be no specific targets set for the full implementation of the VLE. Other reports, however, praised the effective use of VLEs. One institution, the comprehensive strategy of which for the development and implementation of e-learning was identified as a feature of good practice, had established a virtual campus as a vehicle for online distance learning [University of Ulster, paragraphs 97 to 101]. Another institution's use of its VLE, both as a pedagogical and communications medium, and in its plans for future development in delivering blended learning, was identified as a feature of good practice [Sheffield Hallam University, paragraph 93]. A third feature of good practice in this area was an institution's use of electronic communication systems, and particularly its VLE, to support flexible and blended learning [University of Northumbria at Newcastle, paragraph 118].

18 An institution which claimed to be 'a leader amongst UK universities in the use of networked electronic systems' and where the design, development and utilisation of its VLE was identified as a feature of good practice, was reported to recognise that the

effective use of the VLE was just one part of implementing blended learning, involving an appropriate mix of face-to-face and e-learning [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 164]. The development of VLEs is covered in greater detail in *Outcomes from institutional audit: Learning support resources, including virtual learning environments*.

### **Staff support for the development and delivery of e-learning**

19 The audit reports note that the organisation of support for the development of e-learning and distance learning takes a variety of forms. Some institutions were reported to have established e-learning committees, policy groups or steering groups to oversee the implementation of strategies and policies and the dissemination of good practice. An e-learning policy group had been set up in one institution, with the aim of 'keeping up to date with developments in e-learning', as well as making recommendations on the development of e-learning, advising on pedagogic and technical issues and promoting good practice. In some institutions dedicated e-learning centres or units had been set up to oversee and coordinate the development of e-learning, while in others e-learning teams were part of established learning and teaching development units. In an institution where e-learning was said to have been promoted initially by 'individual enthusiasms', a Learning Development Innovation Unit had taken over the lead in developing and assuring the quality of e-learning.

20 The audit reports also reveal a variety of ways of organising support for staff developing and delivering e-learning and distance learning. In smaller institutions, or those at an early stage of introducing e-learning, single officers, such as sub-deans for e-learning or e-learning development officers, had been appointed to lead developments and provide support, while in larger institutions, support for staff was concentrated at faculty, school or departmental level. It is noted in several reports that support was available to staff in both the technological and the pedagogical aspects of e-learning. In at least two institutions, professors of e-learning had been appointed to provide pedagogical guidance to staff, and in others, pedagogical issues were addressed in research centres for e-learning or learning and teaching units. One report recommended that the institution should place a greater emphasis on pedagogical considerations as it developed a more centrally coordinated approach to e-learning.

21 Several audit reports found that institutions with a substantial involvement in e-learning and distance learning had identified staff training and development as a priority. An e-learning strategy group in one institution had been tasked with providing more 'in-depth training' for staff in using its VLE, and in another, staff development was coordinated by an e-learning staff development task group. In another institution, the e-learning strategy was articulated with the human resources strategy to support staff development.

22 An institution where the coherent and comprehensive strategy for the development and implementation of e-learning had been identified as a feature of good practice was reported to make full provision for staff development, in order to assist staff to engage with the development of e-learning materials and online programmes. All staff teaching online courses were required to complete an

e-moderation programme, and the completion of an e-learning pedagogy module in a continuing professional development framework was voluntary for established staff but mandatory for new staff [University of Ulster, paragraphs 84 and 100 to 101]. Another institution was found to use a postgraduate certificate programme in Academic Practice to introduce staff to e-learning. A postgraduate diploma module on the application of learning technologies was available to academic and support staff involved in e-learning in a further institution. The challenge of ensuring that staff were adequately prepared for the delivery of e-learning had led one institution to develop a certificate in virtual tutoring, which was reported to be pedagogically well founded as it exposed staff to direct experience of the 'challenges, concepts, possibilities and issues' in the provision of e-tutoring.

### Handbooks and guides

23 In recognition of the particular challenges involved in the development and delivery of e-learning, one institution had produced a guide on flexible learning. This encouraged good practice in embedding e-learning by providing clear advice on establishing educational aims and deciding realistic learning outcomes, in addition to providing instructions on how to construct user-friendly modules. The audit report noted that the guide was 'a very practical effort to encourage tentative staff to move towards a blended learning approach to their teaching methods'. Another institution with a large number of part-time teaching staff had developed an e-learning primer to guide external tutors in the use of e-learning databases. An e-learning operational manual in another institution was described in the report as a valuable reference document for staff.

24 In one institution the existing programmes delivered by distance learning had been initiated by academics in one department, with limited engagement with central services, and considerable efforts were being made to provide support for a planned expansion of e-learning. This included the dissemination across the institution of a user-friendly guide to issues in the quality assurance of distance-learning, which acknowledged the challenges involved as well as providing exemplars of ways to address them; a centrally organised range of workshops on aspects of distributed and distance learning, including an introduction to e-learning and a regular e-learning seminar series, and formal staff development opportunities. The audit report concluded that much valuable work had been undertaken to prepare staff to exploit teaching through distance-learning methods, and aspects of existing provision were identified as a feature of good practice [Queen Mary, University of London, paragraphs 121 to 122].

25 The audit reports indicate that the increased use of e-learning to support teaching, learning and assessment presents a challenge for the delivery and quality assurance of specialist learning support resources. Several features of good practice in meeting this challenge are identified in the reports. These include the development of an e-library, offering a readily accessible collection of full-text peer-reviewed articles, relevant databases and information, and e-books [Henley Management College, paragraph 120]; the seamless access through a student portal to a variety of e-learning resources [University of Nottingham, paragraphs 102 and 187]; and the arrangements for the scrutiny and quality control of e-learning materials [University of Bolton, paragraphs 39 and 105].

26 In one institution, the strategy for the development and implementation of e-learning of which was identified as a feature of good practice, an Institute of Lifelong Learning worked with course and subject teams to support and ensure the quality of e-learning materials, according to an established framework for e-learning standards [University of Ulster, paragraphs 98 to 101]. A framework for the quality management of distance-learning programmes, particularly in relation to assuring the quality of distance-learning materials, was noted as a feature of good practice in an institution praised for its strategic approach to the development of e-learning [University of Leicester, paragraphs 120 to 121].

### Quality assurance processes

27 The *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning* (1999) focused on those aspects of distance learning where the 'distance element' presented a special challenge to the assurance of quality of provision and the security of academic standards of programmes of study and awards. Increasing the flexibility of on-campus delivery through e-learning also requires particular vigilance in respect of quality assurance mechanisms. This was recognised by the incorporation of the *Guidelines* in the second edition of Section 2 of the *Code of practice: Collaborative provision, and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* which was published under the new extended title in September 2004 (see paragraphs 2-4 above).

28 Consideration of the institutional audit reports published after September 2004 shows that most institutions were aware of the implications of the revision of Section 2 of the *Code of practice* for the quality assurance of their e-learning and distance-learning provision. Institutions were reported to be 'reflecting' on it, to have 'taken cognisance' of it, to be about to review current processes and practices against it, or to have aligned procedures with its precepts. A 'gap analysis' process was reported to have enabled one institution to identify appropriate modifications to policies and practices, and another institution was found to have mapped its regulations for distance-learning programmes against the precepts of Section 2 of the *Code of practice*. One institution expected validation panels for new programmes that included e-learning or delivery by means of flexible and/or distributed methods to refer to it. When an audit team found no specific reference to either the *Guidelines* or the revised Section 2 of the *Code of practice* in a self-evaluation document, the institution was encouraged to take account of the revised section as it developed its approach to delivery through distributed and distance learning. Another institution which was reported to be considering the implications of the revised section at the time of the audit was encouraged to incorporate the guidance found in the *Code of practice* as it developed its quality management arrangements for blended learning.

29 There is general recognition in the audit reports of the need for additions or modifications to quality assurance processes for programmes involving e-learning and distance learning. In one report, where the institution's framework for the quality management of distance-learning programmes was identified as a feature of good practice, programmes delivered by distance learning were subject to the same procedures for approval, monitoring and review as provision delivered on-campus. Those procedures were supplemented by an internal code of practice on distance learning, setting out policies for establishing and delivering such programmes

[University of Leicester, paragraphs 117 to 121]. Assessment for flexible and distributed learning programmes in another institution was found to be required to conform to 'Additional Criteria for Assessing Quality and Standards of Distance Learning Provision'. In another institution programmes delivered online were subject to a special planning approval process, in view of the level of investment required.

30 Additional procedures for the quality assurance of distributed and distance learning noted in another audit report included the internal and external peer review of learning materials as part of the programme approval. There was also an evaluation of the effectiveness of learning, teaching and assessment methods with reference to e-learning and other forms of distributed learning in annual monitoring, periodic review and external examiners' reports. Other additional elements in relation to e-learning and distance learning noted in the reports under approval, monitoring and review procedures include: the use of expert external advisers on approval and review panels; the inclusion of staff with experience of e-learning on approval panels; scrutiny by panels of learning materials; and recognition by panels that students studying off-campus needed access to additional support and resources 'to counter any potential for isolation'.

31 There are recommendations concerning quality assurance procedures for e-learning and distance learning in several of the audit reports. These recommendations for action include the need to develop quality assurance procedures to focus on the particular requirements of distributed and distance learning; ensuring that assessment methods were aligned with stated learning outcomes, with particular reference to programmes delivered in the distance-learning mode; moving to a more centrally coordinated approach to the quality assurance of e-learning, with a greater emphasis on pedagogical considerations; considering whether procedures and arrangements for validation were adequate for making judgements on those programmes delivered wholly by distance learning and those demanding a high level of technical support; and considering what quality control arrangements might be suitable for e-learning materials.

### **Student feedback**

32 There are indications in the institutional audit reports that institutions appreciated the importance of, and the challenges involved in, obtaining feedback from students on their experience of e-learning. It was noted in one audit report that an institution had sought to involve students in developing e-learning in some faculty groups. Feedback on their learning experiences had been sought through bodies such as assessment boards, learning and teaching committees, and staff-student consultative committees. In another report it was recorded that student views on e-learning and distance learning had been gathered as part of a wide-ranging project to embed e-learning as a tool to support conventional programmes. In view of the practical difficulties of organising staff-student consultative committees for students involved in distance learning, departments in another institution were permitted to seek the views of distance-learning students in less formal ways. Another institution was invited to consider ways of obtaining direct data about the e-learning experience, such as rigorous evaluations and action research enquiries, as well as student opinions. One institution was attempting to deal with low levels of feedback from

e-learning modules by revising feedback questionnaires and using a free online induction module for all e-learning students to manage students' expectations of e-learning. In response to indications in a discipline audit trail that distance-learning students did not always receive the same level of assessment feedback as other students, and did not always have the same opportunities to give feedback on their learning experience, one institution was invited to consider the means by which distance-learning students could contribute more effectively to student representation processes.

33 The audit reports provide some evidence of the reactions of students to e-learning, particularly in the reports of discipline audit trails. Almost without exception, students were reported to be positive about their experience of e-learning and distance learning and particularly appreciative of the quality of the e-learning resources available to them. It was noted in one report that members of an e-learning programme, 'all of whom were mature and returning after an, in some cases significant, period, praised both the availability and the usefulness of on-line induction material, as well as the quality of the material provided to them on-line'.

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

34 The 59 institutional audit reports under consideration in this paper identify almost twice as many features of good practice as are found in the 70 reports considered in the first series of *Outcomes...* papers; there are also many fewer recommendations for action on approaches to the development of e-learning and distance learning. Fewer institutions were found to have little or no provision of this sort or to be at an early stage of its development. More institutions were found to have expanded, or be planning to expand their provision. For many institutions, e-learning has come to be regarded as a core activity rather than the preserve of enthusiasts in individual subject areas. The quality of e-learning resources continues to attract approval and the VLEs that support e-learning appear to have become more sophisticated and attract fewer recommendations for action. Although students continue to be positive about their e-learning experiences, the audit reports reflect the need for institutions to remain vigilant about the additional quality assurance mechanisms required in relation to e-learning and distance learning.

### Conclusions

35 The evidence of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 is that the potential of e-learning to enhance the student learning experience was generally recognised and that most institutions had developed appropriate strategies and policies. The need to provide guidance and support for staff involved in the development and delivery of e-learning and distance learning, both centrally and in faculties, schools or departments, was also appreciated. Considerable advances were being made in the technology supporting e-learning and in the quality of e-learning materials.

36 The publication of the revised *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* pre-dated by a few months the publication of the first audit report considered in this paper. However, institutions

were found to be aware of the implications of precepts of the *Code of practice* and of the need to make adjustments to quality assurance processes to fit more flexible forms of delivery. The feedback gathered from students on their learning experiences was favourable.

## 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  
Harper Adams University College  
Conservatoire for Dance and Drama  
American InterContinental University - London

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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

**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>5</sup>

University of Worcester

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts<sup>6</sup>

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

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<sup>5</sup> Now Birmingham City University

<sup>6</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)

#### **Title**

- 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 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 *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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