

Outcomes from institutional audit
Closing overview
Second series



Sharing good practice

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Summary

This *Closing overview* concludes the second series of QAA's *Outcomes from institutional audit (Outcomes)* papers, for which the 59 institutional audit reports from the audits undertaken in the academic sessions 2004-05 and 2005-06 provided the source material.

The overall findings of the thematic papers in the second series of *Outcomes* support the judgement of the audit reports on which they are based - that broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institutions' current and likely future management of the quality of their programmes and the academic standards of their awards.

This *Closing overview* explores the extent to which institutions audited between 2004 and 2006 maintained the impetus of development in response to changing economic, social and demographic circumstances and political initiatives established by the parallel paper for the first series of *Outcomes*. It concludes that institutions were generally responding positively to the challenges and opportunities presented by the new arrangements for quality assurance introduced in England and Northern Ireland in 2001-02 and the completion of the Academic Infrastructure, and new ways of delivering and supporting students' learning.

The paper indicates that key examples of the commitment by institutions to continuous quality assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience include evidence of developments in processes for assessment and classification of awards in order to ensure greater consistency, and of widespread involvement of external peers, supported by the reports provided by external examiners, in the approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes.

The availability of the Academic Infrastructure in its complete form as a set of agreed external reference points had enabled institutions to review, and often enhance, their quality and academic standards arrangements in these areas and in many other aspects of institutional activity.

The academic and personal support and guidance provided for all students, but especially for those with particular support needs, is identified in the paper as a major strength of institutions audited in this period. Institutions were also providing opportunities for students to develop transferable and employability skills, and were supporting the student learning experience through use of e-learning and virtual learning environments. Moreover, while widening participation in and access to higher education, institutions had recognised the nature and levels of support required to improve student retention, as well as making growing use of management information to monitor student progression and performance.

Introduction

1 An objective of institutional audit, which succeeded both continuation audit (at the institutional level) and subject review (at the level of the discipline or subject) in England and Northern Ireland in 2002, is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high quality in teaching and learning' (*Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)*, paragraph 10). 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 thematic briefing papers, describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the institutional audit reports. Since 2005 these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit*.

2 The first series of *Outcomes* papers drew on the findings of the audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004. The second series was based on the findings of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006. Where possible, the papers in the second series included a brief section which compared its key features with those of its predecessor in the first series.

3 The institutional audit reports produced throughout the cycle of audit which ran between 2002-03 and 2005-06 are large complex documents, rich in content. For most readers who wish to have access to that content, the length and complexity of the reports, and the way relevant information can be dispersed throughout them is a barrier to using them, whether as a collage of snapshots of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland over a relatively short timescale, or to learn about how different institutions might approach a particular matter. That is the rationale for the *Outcomes* papers: to make this useful material more readily available for the benefit of higher education institutions, their staff and students, and others wishing to know more about higher education in England and Northern Ireland in this period.

4 The papers analyse and discuss aspects of the work of institutions as they are described and evaluated in the institutional audit reports. Practice which is improving the management of quality or academic standards or learning and teaching in a particular institution is highlighted, and difficulties commonly encountered by institutions are indicated. Recurring themes within the features of good practice and recommendations for action identified in the reports are discussed.

5 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 and references the features of good practice in individual audit reports associated with the particular topic.

6 In the UK, higher education institutions are independent and self-governing, with responsibility for maintaining the academic standards of their awards (or, for those without their own degree-awarding powers, the awards of another institution), and

for managing the quality of learning opportunities they provide for students. Each institution is distinctive, designing their provision to meet their individual mission, history and context. It should be emphasised that the features of good practice mentioned in the *Outcomes* papers 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.

7 A number of papers in each *Outcomes* series noted that sound and effective practice in the area under consideration extended beyond those institutions specifically linked with features of good practice. The discussion in these papers, therefore, also includes these examples. Recommendations made in the audit reports are not highlighted in the *Outcomes* papers in the same way as features of good practice. However, the papers do draw attention to aspects of a particular topic where clusters of recommendations in the audit reports suggest that additional attention to practices or procedures might improve institutional arrangements or forestall problems.

8 The topics covered by papers in the second series of *Outcomes* are listed in Appendix 2 (page 22), along with the short name used to identify them in the discussion which follows. In this *Closing overview*, unless otherwise indicated, the paper referred to is the relevant title from the second series. Although QAA retains copyright in the contents of the *Outcomes* papers they can be freely downloaded from its web site and cited with acknowledgement. This *Closing overview* concludes the second series of *Outcomes*, for which the 59 institutional audit reports from the audits undertaken in academic years 2004-05 and 2005-06 provided the source material (the institutional audit reports are listed in Appendix 1, page 19). It does not set out to summarise the findings of all the papers in the second series, but focuses on overarching themes emerging from the series as a whole.

9 The key finding from these 59 institutional audits was that, with one exception, each of the higher education institutions was found to merit confidence in the soundness of its current, and likely future, management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards, with only two of the audit reports qualifying that view in some way. For the institutions themselves, and for their students and external stakeholders, this finding provides solid evidence that higher education institutions were properly discharging their responsibilities as autonomous providers of higher education.

10 This *Closing overview* follows the parallel paper in the first series of *Outcomes* in outlining the ways in which higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland responded to changing circumstances whether economic, social or demographic, or arising from Government and other policies in the period 2004-06. These included the challenges and opportunities presented by the new arrangements for quality assurance introduced in England and Northern Ireland in 2001-02; the completion of the Academic Infrastructure; new ways of delivering curricula; and other national policies and initiatives. The earlier paper indicated the generally positive response of institutions to these challenges and opportunities. A particular aim of this succeeding paper is to explore the extent to which institutions audited in 2004-05 and 2005-06 maintained the impetus of development.

Sources of information for institutional audit

11 The institutional audit method introduced in 2002 brought together enquiries about institutions' management of quality and academic standards at the institutional level with linked enquiries undertaken at the level of the discipline or the subject through the discipline audit trails. At institutional level, audit teams were expected to gather information to complete a detailed report framework which offered suggestions for enquiries and indicative headings for the audit report. The audit reports show that auditors responded to this advice by producing substantial accounts of what they had learned about institutions' arrangements, based on the institutions' own accounts in their self-evaluation documents, on information in the public domain (such as *Ofsted* and other published reports), and on the written submissions most student representative bodies provided to support individual audits. Information from these sources was further supplemented by insights gathered by audit teams from institutions' other documents and from discussions with staff, students and partners in the course of a briefing visit and a subsequent audit visit (for further information on the nature of the institutional audit method, please see *Series 1: Closing overview*, paragraphs 15-27).

12 The purpose of the institutional self-evaluation document was to act as 'a key reference point for the audit team', providing both a description and an evaluation of the institution's conduct of its responsibilities for assuring the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards (*Handbook*, Annex B, paragraphs 1-2). Institutions were advised to incorporate 'a view on the perceived strengths and limitations of its current institutional arrangements for the assurance of quality and standards' and to make reference to such aspects of their individual circumstances as their 'style' and 'mission' (*Handbook*, Annex B, paragraph 8). As a consequence, the audit reports contain useful evidence of institutional policy development.

13 The findings of the two *Outcomes* papers on the role of the self-evaluation document in institutional audit are very similar. The paper in the second series indicated that, as a whole, self-evaluation documents fulfilled their purpose in supplying accurate and evaluative accounts of institutional quality procedures (*The self-evaluation document*, paragraph 21), and that such accounts were pointers for audit teams to the effectiveness of an institution's management of academic quality and standards (paragraph 55). Although few 'significant disparities' were found between claims made in self-evaluation documents and the findings of audit teams, some cases were identified where the strengths of institutional arrangements had been exaggerated, but also where deficiencies had been overstated (paragraph 53). The areas where there was disagreement between claims made in a self-evaluation document and the findings of the audit team most commonly related to approval, monitoring and review processes; the use of the Academic Infrastructure; and aspects of relations with students (notably electronic communication) (paragraphs 22-26).

14 Across both series, the topics that most frequently resulted in 'self-criticism' by institutions in their self-evaluation documents were communication with students and arrangements for the management of quality within the institution. The emphasis moved between series from the first to the second of these, and within the latter from a focus on programme approval procedures to one on management information

systems (paragraph 54). Neither paper, however, identified much evidence of self-evaluation documents being 'self-critical about student-related concerns such as external examiners and assessment' (paragraph 54).

15 In the institutions audited between 2004 and 2006, nearly all student representative bodies took up the invitation to provide a written submission for audit teams evaluating the experience of students as learners and as participants in the management of quality and standards at their institution (*Handbook*, Annex D, paragraph 7). On the whole, audit teams found a large measure of congruence between student-written submissions and the institutional self-evaluation document, and the audit reports also indicate that in many cases the student written submission acted as a stimulus to institutional enhancement of learning opportunities and quality assurance.

16 The main areas of comment in student written submissions cited by audit reports concerned learning resources, academic guidance and personal support, student representation and feedback, and published student information. While student evaluations of these areas were largely positive, there was recurring criticism of variability in provision and support, and of the difference in effectiveness of institutional level and local arrangements for representation and feedback.

Themes

17 The themes which emerge from consideration of the papers published in the second series of *Outcomes* can be ordered under the following headings:

- Managing quality and standards
 - Institutional oversight and delegation
 - Assessment and classification of awards
 - Programme approval, review and monitoring
 - Externality in programme approval and review
 - Approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision
 - The role of students
 - The use of statistical data
 - Approaches to enhancement.
- The Academic Infrastructure
 - *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
 - *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*
 - Subject benchmark statements
 - Programme specifications.
- The student experience
 - Academic and personal support and guidance
 - Developing modes of delivering and supporting learning
 - Widening participation.

Managing quality and standards

Institutional oversight and delegation

18 The question of how institutions sustained effective oversight of the maintenance of academic quality and standards where responsibility for conducting the associated management arrangements had been delegated to schools or departments was discussed in the *Series 1: Closing overview* (paragraphs 61-64), concluding that the audit reports had found that it was 'not straightforward'. Without sufficient institutional oversight and institutional cohesion, the delegation of responsibility was liable to result in inconsistent practices and outcomes. In the period 2004-06, the theme of delegation (or devolution) was a common topic in self-evaluation documents, which generally reflected a view of quality management as 'a compact between the deliverers of learning and the institution', the latter carrying responsibility for regulatory scrutiny. Institutional policies to increase delegation were linked with aims of reinforcing local ownership of quality assurance, while in institutions with traditional subject autonomies central regulation might be strengthened to enhance uniformity. 'In either case, a common focus of self-evaluations was the balance to be struck between the scope given to local responsibility and the central monitoring oversight of the conduct of that responsibility' (*Frameworks for quality and standards*, paragraph 9).

19 The *Outcomes* paper on *Frameworks for quality and standards* listed among the key concerns raised in audit reports 'the need for improved central oversight of the management of quality and standards, with particular reference to devolved arrangements and the assurance of consistency' (paragraph 15). The findings of the papers from both series on this topic were that the quality of the link between the centre of the institution and faculties, schools and departments was a key determinant of success in managing academic quality and standards. Overall, the papers were able to conclude that, while concerns about institutional frameworks or aspects of them could be found dispersed throughout the audit reports, generally institutional quality management structures were functioning effectively and a range of good practice associated with the relationship between central and local responsibilities had been identified.

20 Across the whole period 2002-06, the aspects of institutional frameworks for managing quality and academic standards which most frequently attracted features of good practice were institutional documentation of quality assurance systems and the role of central and administrative support. Recommendations related particularly to the character of institutional frameworks; cohesion between the centre and faculties, schools or departments; and the specification and deployment of responsibilities; all of which matters tended to be linked.

Assessment and classification of awards

21 The topic of 'consistency' in relation to assessment and classification of awards remained a key concern in the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006. The *Outcomes* paper on *Assessment* reached the conclusion that institutions had given 'sustained and careful attention to the security, reliability and consistency of their assessment arrangements' (paragraph 48). The paper on *Frameworks for quality and*

standards noted a general 'process of review and change in assessment policy leading to greater harmonisation of practices and thus greater equity in student experience' (paragraph 38). Such developments in assessment policy were associated with the influence of the Academic Infrastructure, specifically the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*) *Section 4: External examining* and *Section 6: Assessment of students* and *The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (the FHEQ). The audit reports indicated the 'prominent role' played by *Section 6* in 'guiding and promoting the good practice that [had] developed' (*Assessment*, paragraph 48). The *Outcomes* paper on *The Code of practice* noted the widely reported 'direct influence' of *Section 6* on assessment policy and frameworks (paragraph 48). Similarly, the paper on *The FHEQ* was able to confirm that 'most institutions took care to ensure that the standards of their academic awards met the expectations of the FHEQ' (paragraph 25).

22 The audit reports also showed, however, that variable practice in assessment and classification, while it was being addressed, had not been wholly removed. A quarter of audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 contain features of good practice relating to assessment, but a large proportion contain recommendations on the topic, many of which had regard to 'inconsistencies within institutions in their assessment arrangements' (*Assessment*, Summary). This pattern was similar to that found in the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004. The paper on *Frameworks for quality and standards* stated that 'despite...evidence of a wide range of harmonising initiatives, the audit reports contained numerous recommendations to address continuing variability in assessment and classification processes, and the implications of this variability for comparability of standards and the equitable treatment of students' (paragraph 45). The paper on *The Code of practice* found that the 'shared theme' of recommendations relating to *Section 6* explicitly was 'the need for consistency in policies, procedures and implementation' (paragraph 49).

23 Some *Outcomes* papers drew attention to the effects of inconsistency within particular contexts. The paper on *Combined honours* observed that, where institutions used two or more different methods for classifying honours degrees, students following joint or combined programmes stood to be disadvantaged (paragraph 29). Variability of assessment practices across schools and departments was also a topic raised in audit reports in relation to work-based and placement learning (*Placements and employability*, paragraph 35). On the other hand, the audit reports indicated that the alignment of arrangements to ensure consistency with the awarding institution's normal practices and standards was generally taken into account by institutions with regard to their collaborative provision (*Collaborative provision*, paragraph 59).

24 A different perspective on the theme of 'consistency' appeared in a number of audit reports, where the focus was placed on the primacy of comparability of academic standards within subjects, and between institutions, rather than within institutions, and across subjects. The paper on *Assessment* observed that 'many institutions in these 59 reports appeared to share a general concern that the use of methods to secure fair results across different subjects within an institution might well deliver results that were unfair across different institutions offering a particular subject' (paragraph 24). The paper went on to say, however, that there was 'little robust evidence to show whether such concerns were well founded'.

Nevertheless, both the papers on *Assessment* and *External examiners* found little evidence of how comparability of academic standards within subjects and between institutions was in fact established by the external examining role (*Assessment*, paragraph 25; *External examiners*, paragraph 19).

25 While institutional oversight of assessment and award classification frameworks continued to be an area which attracted a considerable number of recommendations in the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006, as it had been in the earlier audit reports, the number of features of good practice identified in connection with this topic also increased. The steps taken by institutions to harmonise arrangements gained momentum during the latter period, notwithstanding evidence of residual variability (*Frameworks for quality and standards*, paragraph 73).

Programme approval, review and monitoring

26 Over the period 2002-2006, there was extensive reappraisal of and change in the systems used by institutions for approval, review and monitoring of programmes. The *Series 1: Closing overview* noted that many monitoring and periodic review systems employed by institutions had only been recently introduced at the time of audit (paragraphs 32, 36). The audit reports indicated that a growing influence on institutions' development of these systems was the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, and the Academic Infrastructure in general (*Series 1: Closing overview*, paragraphs 33-4). Papers in the second series of *Outcomes* revealed significant advances in this area. One third of the audit reports identify features of good practice in relation to programme approval and review, and about one sixth in relation to programme monitoring. While the number of recommendations made on both topics was noticeably greater, overall, the audit reports indicate that institutions' processes are operating effectively.

27 Periodic review, which was at the implementation stage in many of the institutions audited during 2002-04, appeared to be 'universally embedded' by the time of the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 (*Validation and review*, paragraph 46). While the evidence of the audit reports was that many of the programme monitoring systems had been put in place fairly recently, this was largely due to the institutions following the advice of *Section 7* that such systems should be regularly reviewed (*Programme monitoring*, paragraphs 44-5, 51). The *Outcomes* paper on *Validation and review* concluded that, in general, institutions had incorporated the Academic Infrastructure into their programme approval and periodic review processes and were aligned with the guidance contained in *Section 7* of the *Code of practice* (paragraph 51). Similarly positive conclusions were reached in the four papers which considered the individual elements of the Academic Infrastructure (*Subject benchmark statements*, paragraph 18; *The Code of practice*, paragraph 51; *Programme specifications*, Summary; *The FHEQ*, paragraph 25).

28 Some areas of weakness with regard to the role and functioning of institutional oversight in connection with programme approval, review and monitoring were identified in the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004. These areas included the processing of conditions set at programme validation and institutional accountability, and the consistency and scope of monitoring information reported

to the centre (*Series 1: Closing overview*, paragraphs 38-9). In similar vein, the paper on *Validation and review* identified that the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 contained a number of recommendations linked with the clarity of institutional endorsement of approval decisions, while the need for central oversight and accountability was the theme of a cluster of recommendations related to periodic review (paragraphs 48 and 50). The paper on *Programme monitoring* found continuing 'inconsistency and variability of practice' linked with 'the devolution of responsibilities to the local level in a way that allowed considerable scope for interpretation and variation' (paragraphs 52, 18). This theme was also picked up by institutions themselves in self-evaluation documents, which were noted in a number of audit reports to refer to 'variability of documentation...and the limited nature of institutional oversight in a heavily devolved institution' (*The self-evaluation document*, paragraph 39).

Externality in programme approval and review

29 A number of concerns were identified in the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004 in connection with the disparateness of institutional approaches to external involvement in approval and review, particularly the role of external advisers and the criteria for their appointment (*Validation and review* (Series 1), Summary). While much good practice was observed, there was also a considerable volume of recommendations linked with the nature of external contributions to programme approval and review processes. By 2004-06, the audit reports indicated that, on the whole, institutions had adopted satisfactory arrangements for incorporating external advice into approval processes, largely through membership of validation panels (*Validation and review*, 24). The paper observed, however, that 'not all institutions make the distinction between external advice taken by programme teams during the process of [programme] development and external advice taken by approval bodies' (paragraph 25). The audit reports demonstrate that progress is being made across the sector in relation to external involvement in programme approval processes, but a number of recommendations continued to be made.

30 In relation to periodic review, 'almost all' institutions included an external participant in their processes, and their contribution was noted to be 'impartial, critical and robust' (*Validation and review*, paragraph 38). The audit reports contained few recommendations linked with external input to the review process. The overall finding of the paper on *Validation and review* was that concerns about the need for greater externality raised in the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004 were far less prevalent in the period 2004-06 (paragraphs 24 and 38). Moreover, the *Outcomes* paper on *Employers and PSRBs* observed that there were frequent contributions from these external sources to institutional programme approval and review procedures as well as to programme design (paragraph 34).

31 A further aspect of the role of externality in the monitoring and review of provision is the contribution of external examiners. The *Outcomes* paper on *External examiners* found that 'comments by external examiners in their reports were making an important contribution to the work of safeguarding academic standards and managing the quality of provision', through their use as part of annual monitoring and periodic review procedures (paragraph 57).

Approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision

32 In the area of programme approval, monitoring and review, as in the management of quality and standards more generally, the increased risks associated with collaborative provision (especially when overseas) commonly gave rise to augmented institutional precautions (*Collaborative provision*, paragraphs 22-3). The paper on *Collaborative provision* noted that while procedures for approval, review and monitoring largely replicated those for internal programmes, they might involve adjustments or modifications. For example, in the case of annual monitoring, there might be additional reporting lines, posts and committees (paragraphs 46, 52, 55, 81). In several audit reports, it was also noted that institutions needed to consider the ability of extant quality systems to handle planned major expansions of collaborative provision (*Frameworks for quality and standards*, paragraphs 66-7).

The role of students

33 The audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 indicated that institutions had recognised the significance of effective student representation arrangements, and there was also evidence that student representation had capacity to influence institutional policy. Institutions were committed to ensuring representation at institutional level by officers of student representative bodies (*Student representation and feedback*, paragraph 28). A number of institutions had taken steps to ensure that effective representation was provided for different groups, such as part-time, postgraduate or distance learning students, within an environment of growing student diversity (paragraph 27).

34 The challenge for many institutions in making arrangements for student representation was how to render it 'consistent and effective' (*Student representation and feedback*, paragraph 24). The challenges posed by variability in arrangements and participation between programmes or departments were also evident in the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004, and were identified by institutions themselves in their self-evaluation documents (*The self-evaluation document*, paragraph 43). A particular difficulty was noted in relation to students undertaking combined or joint honours programmes (*Combined honours*, paragraph 53). Even in a context where arrangements for student representation emerged as a general strength, in specialist institutions, questions of consistency remained a concern (*Specialist institutions*, paragraph 40).

35 A number of *Outcomes* papers discussed the topic of student feedback. Two papers addressed the particular circumstances of joint and combined programme students and how their feedback needs might be met (*Combined honours*, paragraph 55; *The self-evaluation document*, paragraph 42). More generally, the paper on *Student representation and feedback* concluded that, while institutions recognised the importance of students' feedback on both the conduct of their programmes and their overall experience, institutional responses to students on the outcomes of their feedback were uneven (paragraphs 32, 40). The *Series 1: Closing overview* identified the risks of feedback overload (paragraph 46), and this concern was, to a degree, borne out in the evidence of the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006. However, a number of institutions were reported to have reviewed their feedback

mechanisms in response to developments such as the National Student Survey in order to avoid 'unnecessary duplication' (*Student representation and feedback*, paragraph 34).

36 Variability in arrangements for collecting and using feedback from graduates was identified as requiring further development in the period 2002-04 and this remained the case in the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 (*Student representation and feedback*, paragraphs 38, 40).

The use of statistical data

37 The contribution of statistical data to the monitoring and evaluation of academic standards is relevant to a number of topics considered by *Outcomes* papers in the second series, including recruitment and admission of students, programme monitoring, widening participation and international students, as well as being considered directly in the paper on *Progression and completion statistics*. For the period 2002-04, the evidence of the audit reports was that there was 'a great deal of work in progress' with respect to management information systems (*Series 1: Closing overview*, paragraph 41). For the period 2004-06, the audit reports generally indicated a mixture of progress being made and difficulties being encountered. A summary of the position was given by the paper on *Progression and completion statistics*:

The audit reports make it clear that progress has been made in this area since publication of the corresponding paper in the first *Outcomes* series....Many institutions are beginning to recognise the need to develop the collection of data and analysis of progression and completion statistics and the benefits that would follow....In most cases the reports show that institutions are still working through matters connected with technical development and associated staff development, and that many are encountering difficulties in so doing. (Summary).

The audit reports consequently contain a considerable number of recommendations on this topic. The paper found, as did the parallel paper in the first series of *Outcomes*, that institutional deployment of statistical evaluation was less well developed than other aspects of quality assurance and enhancement (*Progression and completion statistics*, paragraph 34). Institutions themselves commonly identified management information systems supporting quality management as the most critical area for improvement (*The self-evaluation document*, paragraph 54).

38 There was also some evidence that use of data varied both between and within institutions. The paper on *Recruitment and admission of students* found a mixed picture in the use of admissions data to inform annual monitoring of academic standards or the setting of admissions criteria (paragraphs 24, 26, 29, 32-3). With regard to joint and combined programmes, the audit reports indicated that while some institutional management information systems had experienced problems in supplying data, others had facilitated a range of analyses of student progression and achievement (*Combined honours*, paragraphs 27-8). The paper on *Widening participation* noted enhanced institutional awareness of the role of statistical data in identifying students at risk and in need of further support (paragraphs 25, 27).

Approaches to enhancement

39 The *Outcomes* paper on *Intentions for enhancement* suggested that the profile of 'enhancement' was higher in the audit reports published between 2004-06 than in those for the period 2002-04, reflecting increasing debate within the sector about the nature of quality assurance and quality enhancement. The paper concluded that institutions were 'working to establish a coherent, institutional approach to enhancement', although the term 'enhancement' could be used to mean a number of different things 'on a spectrum, ranging from the encouragement of multiple and often local initiatives with the potential to enhance aspects of provision, through to the development of definitive enhancement strategies linked to an institution's strategic or corporate plan' (paragraphs 36-7). Generally, the audit reports indicated that institutions had clearly recognised the need to have arrangements in place to identify opportunities to enhance the quality of the student learning experience, although the methods by which this was being achieved and the extent to which it was being managed systematically and deliberately, varied.

The Academic Infrastructure

The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education

40 By the time of the first institutional audits, in February 2003, all ten sections of the *Code of practice* had been published and were considered as reference points for the audit process. The scope of audit reports reflected this, with almost half of all institutional audit reports published between 2002 and 2006 containing what may be considered very extensive comment on institutional responses to the *Code of practice* as a whole and to its individual sections (*Series 1: Closing overview*, paragraph 48; *The Code of practice*, paragraph 8). There was some indication that institutions whose audit engagement fell later in the 2002-06 audit cycle had, perhaps unsurprisingly, responded more fully to the precepts expressed in the *Code of practice*. The growing currency of the *Code of practice* may also be reflected in the fact that fewer features of good practice and recommendations were identified in the audit reports in connection with this topic in the period 2004-06. Overall, comment in the audit reports about institutions' response to the *Code of practice* was positive, although a greater number of recommendations for action were made than features of good practice identified.

41 The *Code of practice* was intended to provide 'an authoritative reference point for institutions as they consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications' (Foreword to published sections of the *Code of practice*, paragraph 2). The precepts identify the 'key matters' that an institution is expected to show it has addressed through its own quality assurance mechanisms, and the extent and the effectiveness of institutional engagement with the precepts is considered through the audit process, rather than 'evidence of compliance' (paragraph 55). The *Outcomes* paper noted a variety of institutional perceptions of the role of the *Code of practice*, identifying that the attitude of some institutions was one of 'compliance' with the precepts, while others interpreted it as 'guidance' (*The Code of practice*, paragraphs 13, 19-23).

42 The *Outcomes* paper found that generally institutions had given thorough consideration to the *Code of practice* and its individual sections, and had developed or modified their internal codes of practice and procedures in the light of the advice and guidance it contained (*The Code of practice*, paragraph 12). The evidence of the audit reports had shown that certain sections of the *Code of practice* had proved especially influential across the sector, those being *Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes; Section 2: Collaborative provision; Section 4: External examining; Section 6: Assessment of students; and Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review* (titles given in form as they appeared for the first edition of the sections, which remained current for most of the period under consideration). At the same time, it was clear that the remaining sections were also achieving a decisive impact on institutional policy development (*The Code of practice*, paragraph 62).

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

43 The main themes which emerged from consideration of the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004 in relation to the FHEQ were repeated for the period 2004-06. These were award structures and the location of awards within the FHEQ; the links between the FHEQ, learning outcomes and assessment; references to the FHEQ in programme specifications; the embedding of the FHEQ in quality assurance processes and documentation; staff awareness of the FHEQ; and institutional oversight of matters relating to the FHEQ (*FHEQ*, paragraph 9). The *Outcomes* paper in the second series concluded that the progress in institutional engagement with the FHEQ identified for the period 2002-04 had continued and that, in general, institutions had addressed the various aspects effectively. Some inconsistencies had, however, persisted, with institutions having reached different stages in assimilating the FHEQ to institutional structures and linking it with other sections of the Academic Infrastructure (*FHEQ*, paragraphs 16, 24-5). Features of good practice and recommendations reflected the variable correspondence of institutional awards frameworks with the FHEQ, although the paper concluded that 'it is clear from the institutional audit reports that most institutions took care to ensure that the standards of their academic awards met the expectations of the FHEQ' (*FHEQ*, paragraph 25).

Subject benchmark statements

44 Parallel themes also emerged from the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004 and those for 2004-06 in relation to subject benchmark statements: institutional engagement with subject benchmark statements; the use of subject benchmark statements at discipline level; embedding of subject benchmark statements within quality assurance and enhancement procedures; and links between subject benchmark statements and other elements of the Academic Infrastructure (*Subject benchmark statements*, paragraph 8). Engagement with subject benchmark statements at both institutional and discipline levels, and their incorporation into quality assurance procedures such as programme validation and review, increased over the audit cycle, although variable use of statements at discipline level continued to be observed (*Subject benchmark statements*, paragraphs 25-7). The paper concluded that institutions did not appear to regard the statements as demanding strict compliance, but as guides in developing academic curricula (*Subject benchmark statements*, paragraph 27).

45 A general link between subject benchmark statements and programme specifications, noted in the paper in the first series, was also a feature of audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 (*Subject benchmark statements*, paragraph 13), although some unawareness at discipline level of links between subject benchmark statements and, for example, the FHEQ, was also noted (paragraph 24). However, the audit reports also indicated that for discipline areas where subject benchmark statements did not exist, particularly at master's level, programme teams made effective use of the FHEQ (*FHEQ*, paragraphs 15, 27).

Programme specifications

46 The audit reports published during 2004-06 suggest that institutions made significant progress in the use of programme specifications as a means of setting and monitoring academic standards, primarily via institutional programme approval and review mechanisms (*Programme specifications*, paragraphs 2-3, 10-11). The paper noted that 'programme specifications have been embedded to a greater or lesser extent, in institutional processes, and this is reflected both in the smaller number of features of good practice directly related to the topic and in the fact that there are fewer recommendations relating to engagement with programme specifications' (paragraph 35). It had become standard practice also for external examiners to measure students' achievement against the expectations set down in the programme specification (paragraph 13). While the paper noted some continuing debate within and among institutions about such matters as the intended audience and purpose for programme specifications, their introduction was also associated by audit reports with enhancements of quality management processes (paragraph 37).

47 The need for programme specifications to be consistent, accurate, and current if they were to serve their several purposes, such as providing information for students, was linked to a need for academic staff to feel an ownership of the documents. The paper noted the part that could be played by staff development initiatives in clarifying rationales and recommending practice, a theme also evident in the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004 (*Programme specifications*, paragraph 29). As noted above, the audit reports across the cycle indicate the frequency of reference in programme specifications to subject benchmark statements, while finding much less reference in them to the FHEQ or the *Code of practice* (*Programme specifications*, paragraphs 15-17).

The student experience

Academic and personal support and guidance

48 As noted in the *Handbook*, 'at the centre of the (audit) process is an emphasis on students - in terms of the quality of information they receive about their programmes of study, the ways in which their learning is facilitated and supported, and the academic standards they are expected to achieve' (paragraph 3). The audit reports, therefore, contained extensive discussion under the headings 'Academic guidance, support and supervision' and 'Personal support and guidance'. As well as considering support and guidance provided for students in general, the arrangements made to assist particular groups of students and those with special needs for support were

also considered. The findings of the audit reports on these topics were reflected in a several *Outcomes* papers, notably *Academic and personal guidance* (which included arrangements for research students), *Placements and employability; Specialist institutions; International students; E-learning; Learning support resources and VLEs; Collaborative provision; and Combined honours*. Additionally, a special study covering the whole 2002-06 institutional audit cycle considered arrangements made for disabled students.

49 The second series *Outcomes* paper on *Academic and personal guidance* identified this as an area of strength for many institutions, as it was for the period 2002-04, with considerably more features of good practice identified than recommendations for action made in the audit reports (paragraph 32). A theme which was identified for both 2002-04 and 2004-06 was the concerns raised in the audit reports about the variability of support at local levels within an institution, which led to some recommendations for increased institutional monitoring (paragraphs 9, 29-30). The challenges presented by combined programmes in providing equitable support arrangements were widely recognised by institutions. The paper on *Combined honours*, noting the prevalence of recommendations in this area in the audit reports, concluded that effective support arrangements for students following joint and combined programmes were likely to be 'the key to their successful progress' (paragraph 60).

50 The paper on *Academic and personal guidance* identified three significant developments in respect of support for research students. These were the establishment of supervisory teams (rather than a single research supervisor); the enhancement of training in both research methodology and generic skills; and progress in the training of research students to undertake teaching. There were also, however, a considerable number of recommendations about the nature and availability of this latter form of training. (*Academic and personal guidance*, paragraphs 18-19). Also on this topic, the paper on *Staff support and development* noted that recommendations in the audit reports focused on 'the need to provide, monitor or review institutional policies for the use of postgraduate students in teaching, including arrangements for their training and support' (paragraph 27).

51 The growing number of international students within UK higher education was underlined by inclusion of discussion of related support arrangements in 90 per cent of the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006, an increase of about 10 per cent on the reports for 2002-04 (*International students*, Summary). The nature of the comments about the relevant support arrangements was largely positive, with numerous features of good practice identified and few recommendations made. Continuing a theme identified for the period 2002-04, the paper found that institutions were 'aware of the substantial learning and cultural issues' attached to large-scale recruitment of international students for many of whom English was not a first language, and were making a strategic and coordinated approach to the development of support mechanisms that would accommodate further expansion of overseas student numbers (*International students*, paragraphs 4, 30). Statistical analysis of student progression and achievement had given rise to enhanced academic and personal support for international students (paragraphs 5, 24). Overall, international students appeared satisfied with the support and information provided for them by institutions, which reiterated the evidence of the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004 (paragraph 31).

52 The Outcomes special study on *Institutions' support for students with disabilities* analysed the evidence of all 129 audit reports published between 2002 and 2006. The paper noted that, although the audit process contained no requirement for separate reporting on arrangements to support students with disabilities, nearly 95 per cent of reports had done so, mostly positively. There were a number of features of good practice identified and few recommendations made in relation to the topic (*Students with disabilities*, paragraph 3). While the main focus in the audit reports was on personal support and guidance, the reports referred also to the learning and teaching needs of students with disabilities, and to associated learning support resources (paragraphs 20, 27). The audit reports indicated that institutions had considered the *Code of practice*, especially *Section 3: Students with disabilities* (first edition, published 1999), in developing their quality assurance and enhancement procedures and internal processes relating to learning and teaching support for students with disabilities (paragraphs 26, 38). The paper noted the positive feedback, particularly about the work of specialist support services, to be found in students' written submissions provided to support the audit process. Similarly positive comment in the audit reports on support for students with specific needs, such as dyslexic students, was identified in the paper on *Specialist institutions* (paragraph 48).

Developing modes of delivering and supporting learning

53 The *Outcomes* paper on *Placements and employability* indicated institutions' growing focus on the development of students' transferable and employability skills (paragraphs 7, 23-7, 39), which continued the trend identified in the audit reports published between 2002 and 2004, where reference to employability increased over time (*Series 1: Closing overview*, paragraph 58). Features of good practice related to this topic in the audit reports were linked with the development of employability skills, whether this was effected through embedding in the curriculum or through specialist workshops and careers services (*Placements and employability*, paragraphs 24-5).

54 Opportunities for students to undertake work-based learning and mechanisms to support such learning were reflected in a range of features of good practice. The paper noted the prevalence of comment in audit reports on the arrangements made by institutions to ensure that students were well supported when undertaking placements (*Placements and employability*, Summary). The *Outcomes* paper on *Specialist institutions* noted both the integral role of student placements and work experience in the learning opportunities provided by many specialist institutions, and the general quality of the related student support arrangements (paragraph 52). Some audit reports had, however, identified a need for institutions to develop a way of achieving greater consistency of practice in support of placements, as for example when preparing mentors and employers (*Placements and employability*, paragraph 22).

55 Learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology, or e-learning, was an area of rapid development during the period 2004-06 and was coming to be seen within institutions as 'a core activity rather than the preserve of enthusiasts' (*E-learning*, Summary). Generally, the audit reports indicated that institutions were meeting the challenges posed by the expansion of e-learning through attention to such aspects as strategic co-ordination,

the enhancement of technological resources, and support for staff (paragraphs 21, 25, 35). The greater embedding of e-learning within institutional provision was reflected in the identification of almost twice as many features of good practice in the 59 audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 as in the 70 audit reports published in 2002-04 (*E-learning*, paragraph 34). Nonetheless, the paper on *E-learning* observed the 'considerable variation in the scale of, and approach to, e-learning and distance learning' recorded by the reports from the second half of the audit cycle (paragraph 9), while the paper on *Specialist institutions* noted variable implementation of virtual learning environments (VLEs) (paragraph 54).

56 The audit reports published between 2002 and 2004 were noted not to have included much discussion of support arrangements for students engaged in e-learning (*Series 1: Closing overview*, paragraph 53). Nevertheless, throughout the period 2002-06, the feedback from students on their experience of e-learning and the quality of materials and support provided was recorded as being generally positive. However, the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 indicated the need for institutions to 'remain vigilant about the additional quality assurance mechanisms required in relation to e-learning and distance learning' (*E-learning*, paragraph 34). Moreover, some claims made by institutions in their self-evaluation documents about communication with students had been challenged by audit teams because of shortcomings in VLEs or distance learning arrangements (*The self-evaluation document*, paragraph 25).

57 The *Outcomes* paper on *Learning support resources and VLEs* identified generally similar themes. For the most part, institutions had effective systems for ensuring correspondence between the learning resources available and students' academic needs (*Learning support resources and VLEs*, paragraph 28). Student feedback both largely confirmed this and indicated a positive view of support given by academic, technical and library staff (paragraphs 15-16). The evidence of the audit reports was positive also on the support provided for staff in the use of learning resources including VLEs (paragraph 18). These developments were reflected in a notable increase in the proportion of audit reports containing features of good practice on the topic in the period 2004-06. Provision of specialist learning support resources were identified as a particular strength of specialist institutions (*Specialist institutions*, paragraph 50).

58 Concerns about the impact of expanding student recruitment on institutional strategies for the provision and deployment of learning resources were, however, raised in a number of audit reports (*Learning support resources and VLEs*, paragraphs 13). Recommendations for action made in audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 'more frequently concerned access for different groups of students (part-time, multi-campus, joint honours) and matching resources to increasing student numbers than was the case in the first series (2002-04) of reports' (paragraph 43).

59 Institutional approaches to VLEs had become more focused and centrally led in the period 2004-06 (*Learning support resources and VLEs*, paragraph 44). At the same time, the *Outcomes* paper noted the variable rates of progress in use of VLEs both within and between institutions, and the cautious approach to their development taken by the majority (paragraphs 41, 44). Overall, the period 2004-06 showed a

marked increase in the number of features of good practice identified in relation to learning technology, and notably to VLEs, which reflected 'the growing importance and effective use of such technology' (paragraph 42). In similar vein, the paper on *Collaborative provision* observed a 'developing trend for institutions to give staff and students based with their partners access to their VLEs' (paragraph 78).

Widening participation

60 The *Series 1: Closing overview* identified that several of the topics considered by *Outcomes* papers reflected the close attention paid by institutions to the national policy environment, rather than themes predetermined by the institutional audit process. The topics were therefore discussed by institutions in their self-evaluation documents and were hence reflected in the audit reports (paragraph 54). Prominent among these topics was widening participation and access to higher education, which was referred to in 47 of the 59 audit reports published between 2004 and 2006. The audit reports indicated that revised admissions policies 'reflecting institutional commitments to access, widening participation and increased diversity, as expressed in mission statements' were being introduced by institutions (*Recruitment and admission*, paragraph 12). The key areas in institutional responses to the challenges posed by widening participation continued to be those identified for the period 2002-04, including further development of local and regional links with schools and further education providers; the use of admissions and progression data in identifying students at risk; and associated learning support strategies (*Widening participation*, paragraphs 9, 14, 16, 20, 23). The significance of the 'regional agenda' and the role of collaborative arrangements as 'part of the broader strategy for widening participation' was also discussed, specifically in relation to collaborative provision, in the audit reports throughout the audit cycle. (*Collaborative provision*, paragraph 15).

61 The embedding of strategies and procedures for widening participation in the period 2004-06 was reflected in the identification of a greater number of features of good practice in the audit reports. The paper on *Widening participation* noted 'a realisation by institutions committed to widening participation of the nature and levels of support needed to improve student retention in the context of an increasingly diverse body of students' (paragraph 25). The bearing of student diversity on learning support needs was noted also in the paper on *Specialist institutions* (paragraph 47), while a cluster of recommendations could be identified in the audit reports relating to the challenge of providing a 'sufficiency of learning resources to sustain planned expansion' in student recruitment (*Recruitment and admission*, paragraph 7). However, there was also evidence in the audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 of growing institutional use of data to monitor the effects of policies addressed to widening participation (*Recruitment and admission*, paragraph 55).

Conclusions

62 The findings of the 25 papers in the second series of *Outcomes* support the judgement of the 59 institutional audit reports on which they are based - that broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institutions' current, and likely future, management of the quality of their programmes and the academic standards of their awards.

63 The institutional audit method coordinated by QAA for institutions in England and Northern Ireland in the period 2002-06 was the first of its institution-level audit and review methods to be able to draw on the Academic Infrastructure, in its fully developed form, as an external and agreed set of reference points. The *Outcomes* papers in the second series show how the availability of these external reference points had enabled institutions to review, and often enhance, their quality and academic standards arrangements. They show also how institutional audit teams were able, by reference to the Academic Infrastructure, to identify more firmly where institutions' arrangements were or were not meeting the needs of students and other stakeholders.

64 A main aim of this *Closing overview* for the second series of *Outcomes* has been to consider the extent to which institutions audited in the academic sessions 2004-05 and 2005-06 maintained the impetus of development identified in the *Series 1: Closing overview* as having been established during the period 2002-04. Analysis of the *Outcomes* papers in the second series has revealed a broad picture of continuing enhancement of quality assurance systems. As key examples, improvements in assessment procedures and arrangements for the classification of awards were closely linked to the guidance provided in the Academic Infrastructure, and the *Code of practice* in particular has had wide influence on approval and periodic review procedures, and on the employment of external peer advice as a requisite of both. Areas of continuing development and enhancement in relation to the student learning experience included the use of e-learning and VLEs, and provision for developing students' transferable and employability skills. Institutional commitment to widening participation has been accompanied by a realisation of the nature and levels of support required to improve student retention, as well as by growing use of data to monitor student performance and progression.

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

University of London

University College London

Birkbeck College, University of London

Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine

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 Luton¹
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 College²
Canterbury Christ Church University College³
University of Chester
Liverpool Hope University
University College Winchester⁴
Henley Management College⁵
Harper Adams University College

¹ Now the University of Bedfordshire.

² Now Buckinghamshire New University.

³ Now Canterbury Christ Church University.

⁴ Now the University of Winchester.

⁵ Now merged with the University of Reading.

Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

American InterContinental University - London

2005-06

University of Manchester

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

The University of Bolton

Thames Valley University

University of Central England in Birmingham⁶

University of Worcester

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts⁷

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

⁶ Now Birmingham City University.

⁷ Now part of the University College Falmouth.

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

Full title	Date published	Short title for citation
Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards	March 2008	Frameworks for quality and standards
Progression and completion statistics	March 2008	Progression and completion statistics
Learning support resources (including virtual learning environments)	March 2008	Learning support resources
Work-based and placement learning, and employability	April 2008	Placements and employability
Institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education	April 2008	Widening participation
Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports	May 2008	Collaborative provision
Assessment of students	June 2008	Assessment
Arrangements for international students	June 2008	International students
External examiners and their reports	June 2008	External examiners
Recruitment and admission of students	June 2008	Recruitment and admission
Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies	August 2008	Employers and PSRBs
Institutions' support for e-learning	August 2008	E-learning
Programme monitoring arrangements	October 2008	Programme monitoring
Staff support and development arrangements	November 2008	Staff support
Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degrees programmes	November 2008	Combined honours
Student representation and feedback	February 2009	Student representation and feedback
The self-evaluation document in institutional audit	February 2009	The self-evaluation document
Institutions' support for students with disabilities ⁸	March 2009	Students with disabilities
Specialist institutions	June 2009	Specialist institutions
The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland	October 2009	The FHEQ

⁸ This paper was an *Outcomes special study* and considered the findings of the 129 audit reports published between 2002-06 (the dataset for both Series 1 and 2).

Subject benchmark statements	October 2009	Subject benchmark statements
Programme specifications	October 2009	Programme specifications
Validation and approval of new provision, and its periodic review	June 2010	Validation and review
Academic and personal advice, guidance and support for students (including postgraduate research students)	July 2010	Academic and personal guidance
Institutions' intentions for enhancement	September 2010	Intentions for enhancement

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