Annex F

Quality Assurance Agency audit report

1. Introduction

As part of the process of investigating current quality and standard mechanisms in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) with respect to research training, the UKCGE team has reviewed 75 institutional audits on the QAA web site (www.qaa.ac.uk).

The purpose of the review is both to provide a general overview of current practice and to identify:

- specific quality and standard mechanisms adopted by institutions for postgraduate/research training
- particular strengths and pockets of good practice
- weaknesses/ areas requiring further attention.

The first part of this annex briefly sets out the history, policy and process of QAA quality and standard audits. The second part highlights key observations in terms of practice and coverage. The final part summarises the key observations and highlights some difficulties encountered with the QAA audit process.

2. The QAA audit

The process of auditing institutions began in 1991 under the auspices of the Academic Audit Unit of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK). The process was taken over by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in 1992, and was revised following completion of the programme in 1997.

The main principle of the audit is to offer an opinion on the extent to which individual institutions are discharging effectively their corporate responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of their awards and associated programmes of study. It takes as its starting point the assumption that institutions have appropriate quality assurance policies and procedures in place, and also assumes that they can provide convincing evidence that these are working to good effect.

Institutions are audited by external examiners, typically senior academic staff, who visit the institution and produce a report detailing strengths and weaknesses and methods for maintaining quality and standards. The audit checks that the methods used are sufficiently reliable to continue to provide stakeholders with the necessary assurances for the future. Institutions are expected to report back within the year on action that they have taken to deal with any identified problems.

The audit report focuses on four key themes:

- quality strategy
- academic standards
- the learning infrastructure
- internal and external communications.

Details are also given of an institution's collaborative partnerships.

3. Methodology

In reviewing the individual audit reports, the team considered the provision made for postgraduate research training in the following areas:

- quality and standards of awards
- key institutional structures that deal with awards
- the learning infrastructure
- student support.

It also considered any matters with respect to research training arising from the individual reports:

- conclusions
- points for commendation
- highlighted issues.

4. Structures for maintaining quality and standards

The audit reports indicate that the body responsible for assuring and maintaining quality and standards varies between universities. Prototypical structures[1] include institutions that either:

- assure the quality and standards of *all* awards via a central structure, with some devolution to boards or committees:
    - Senate, *or devolved to:*
    - Senate Ordinances and Regulations Committee
    - Academic Board
    - Academic Standards Committee
    - Academic Council
- assure the quality and standards of *research degrees* via a 'second-tier', with some devolution to boards and committees:
    - Graduate (Research) School
    - Research Office
    - Research & Graduate College, *or devolved to:*
    - Graduate School Quality Committee
    - Board of Higher Degree Studies
    - Research (Degree) Committee
    - Board for Graduate Studies
    - Graduate Education and Policy Committee
- assure the quality and standards of *all* degrees or *research degrees* only devolved to:
    - Faculties
    - Departments
    - Schools

  which may or may not have specific boards and committees.

The devolution of all degrees or research degrees to faculty, department and school level suggests that there is an element of risk involved in *maintaining* quality and standards (particularly if the devolved body is responsible for creating its own strategy). Devolution

[1] In some institutions, Senate may bypass academic boards and devolve powers to Research Degree Committees (or similar) if the institution does not have a Graduate School (or similar) in place. A less common devolved structure is that of 'graduate centres', in place at the University of Westminster. Certain processes may also be devolved. For example, the University of North London devolves 'approval procedures' to Research Student Action Groups.

leads to diversity, which may stimulate richness and variation, but may also lead to incompatibility between procedures and regulations.

For example, one institution[2] was exploring the possibility of devolving the responsibility for research degree matters to schools as a positive measure (in the interest of more locally based responsibility and ownership). The audit concluded that there were concerns that current structures were not 'sufficiently well-coordinated to permit satisfactory central monitoring' and that the institution should consider the implications of devolving to schools the 'significant responsibilities for the quality management of research degrees'.

One report noted that an institution[3] which had devolved much of its responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards to its faculties and departments, and which had established a Graduate School in 1993, had 'quite marked differences between faculties over the proportion of first class honours degrees awarded'.

An institution which had followed a formal set of procedures for devolving responsibilities to faculty level[4] encountered difficulties with maintaining relations between the Research Degree Committee and the faculty research degree committees.

Devolved responsibilities are considered to be unproblematic when there are strong central regulations[5] and/or excellent provision for the monitoring of research students, as in the case of one institution where 'variations in arrangements for research training from school to school did not conflict with university-wide requirements and regulations'[6].

5. Admissions

Few of the audit reports mention the procedures associated with admission to a research or postgraduate degree. Of those that did, only one university was cited as requiring postgraduate candidates for all degrees be interviewed.[7] One institution was cited as having a procedure for those students wishing to register for a research degree who did not have an M-level degree.[8] One institution's report states that there were inconsistencies found in the length of reports expected from research students on registering for a MPhil or PhD – 'notwithstanding the requirements of the University's general regulations'.[9]

The very little detail given about admission procedures could indicate that these are not a problem for most institutions. However, the poor and inconsistent application of one university's[10] admissions procedures[11] was the first indicator that much of its practice in maintaining the standards and quality of research degrees needed revision. One university was found to be in danger of becoming 'vulnerable to accusations of unequal treatment' on the basis of unclear criteria for registration of research students.[12] There is obviously a need for clear standards with regard to newly registered research students.

6. Monitoring

Most institutions have in place a similar procedure for maintaining standards – the monitoring of research students through annual progress reports. The Open University requires the submission of a first year report for full-time research students, a probation report for part-time students, and an annual progress report for all other current students.

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[2] Sheffield Hallam University.
[3] University of Durham.
[4] Manchester Metropolitan University. Faculty level research degree committees with delegated powers had been established in 1997-98. Before this each faculty had to provide a formal plan detailing how it would exercise devolved authority for the approval of the registration of research students and the quality assurance of their assessment.
[5] Huddersfield University.
[6] Aston University.
[7] University of Bath.
[8] University of Wales, Bangor.
[9] Aston University.
[10] King's College London.
[11] There was 'evidence that the procedures for the admission of postgraduate students did not always follow formal procedures'. There were 'identified instances where postgraduate studentships had been filled without being advertised'.
[12] University of Keele.

Whilst the audit reports indicate that monitoring processes are in place in most institutions, few indicate where the responsibility lies for reviewing (rather than undertaking) progress reports. The workload for one institution's Director of Graduate Studies in reviewing all progress reports was reported to be 'excessive and increasingly forbidding were research student numbers to expand further'.[13]

Some institutions supplement the annual progress report with other documentation. For example, both Sheffield Hallam University and Glasgow Caledonian University ask students to complete an annual questionnaire. The results are analysed by the Research Degrees Committee. However both universities report that the level of response is low, even when, as in the case of Sheffield Hallam, the completion of the questionnaire is a formal requirement of the student. Warwick University cites the significant role that student feedback plays in ensuring the maintenance of academic standards.

Further initiatives taken by some universities to enhance their monitoring process include: an annual audit of research degree students[14]; an annual summary of all external examiners' reports that highlights good and bad practice[15]; a second level of annual review of students once the departmental progress report has been completed[16]; drawing-up learning agreements with students[17]; assigning an independent *rapporteur* to each research student who produces a progress report.

Monitoring processes may be negatively or positively affected by low numbers of research students. One report, for example, cites the 'modest number of students in some faculties' as contributing to the 'unhelpful informality in the review of their progress'.[18] Another suggests that since a number of schools had very small numbers of research students, they were 'unlikely to have accumulated a critical mass of academic or administrative experience and expertise'.[19] This seems to indicate that a critical mass in terms of a research student population makes setting and establishing monitoring and training programmes worthwhile. However, the small number of research students for one university is seen as an entirely positive element of the monitoring process, in that it 'enabled the university to devote considerable attention to the scrutiny of proposals, supervisory arrangements, conversion from MPhil to PhD, and final examination arrangements'.[20]

As well as progress reports and other documentation, standards may be monitored by members of the teaching staff[21] and assured by internal and external examiners.[22] The University of North London uses its external examiners 'both to verify the standards of its awards and to comment upon the quality of programmes of study', The University of Essex's report states that external examiners are 'central to setting of standards of attainment'.

7. Conversion of MPhil to PhD

There is little detail given about the process of converting a student enrolled on an MPhil course to a PhD. One institutional report mentions that the procedure for conversion is made by relevant faculty through a Departmental Supervisory Committee, and concludes that there are inconsistencies.[23]. Another states that until recently there was no formal requirement for research postgraduates, all of whom are registered initially for an unnamed higher degree, to provide 'written evidence of their research capability' in support of a

[13] University of Salford.
[14] University of Westminster.
[15] University of Teesside.
[16] University of Wales, Swansea.
[17] University of Salford.
[18] Napier University.
[19] Sheffield Hallam University.
[20] University of North London.
[21] University of Durham.
[22] Nottingham Trent University.
[23] University of Wales, Bangor.

transfer of registration to a PhD.[24] The lack of evidence regarding conversion procedures from MPhil to PhD suggests that this is an area that needs further attention by the HEFCE or the QAA to ensure standards are appropriately set and monitored.

One institutional report states that conversion is based on a detailed report at the end of the first year and that the candidate is interviewed by the supervisor and independent internal assessor. It is perhaps not coincidental that the institution[25] has a Graduate School and a code of practice on admission, supervision and examination of research students.

8. Supervision

There are many instances of regulations for supervision and training. The University of East Anglia, for example, produces a Guide to Supervisory Practice, and the Universities of St Andrews, Strathclyde, Nottingham Trent and Leeds all have a code of practice for research supervision. Only one report indicates that there is a procedure for the institution to assure itself that its code of practice is being enforced.[26]

Training for supervisors is typically cited when there is a postgraduate standards programme' or code of practice in place. At the University of Leeds, all supervisors have the opportunity to receive training. However, the reports for some institutions that appear to operate a 'standards programme' do not make any reference to supervisory training.[27]

The role of the supervisor varies between institutions. The University of Hull's report, for example, indicates that structured supervision was the principal mechanism through which the institution's postgraduate degree standards were conveyed to postgraduate students. However, whilst some criteria for appointing supervisors were in place (supervisors must have recognized subject expertise and appropriate skills and training), training for supervisors was not felt to be sufficiently developed.

One instance of bad practice concerned the heavy dependence on small number of supervisors.[28]

9. Research training

Many reports cite the provision of in-house training programmes for research degree students yet it is also a key 'item for further consideration' for many institutions.

Training, like the monitoring of standards, may be performed centrally or locally. For example, some universities organise the training of generic skills via their Graduate Schools, and individual schools organise training in subject-specific fields,[29] whilst some universities make departments responsible for all training.[30] The central provision of training was felt to be useful at one institution as a means of bringing together postgraduate students from diverse disciplines.[31] The University of Liverpool was developing a cross-university training programme for research students that became compulsory in 2000.

Training is felt to be unsuccessful where institutions have low numbers of research students.[32] (This reinforces the view that only a critical mass of research students makes providing adequate training programmes worthwhile.)

10. Examination

[24] University of Reading.
[25] University of Manchester.
[26] University of Strathclyde: 'the code…is monitored through the faculty-based system of departmental reviews'.
[27] University of Sunderland.
[28] Sheffield Hallam University.
[29] University of Warwick; Anglia Polytechnic University.
[30] University of Wales, Cardiff.
[31] University of Wales, Swansea.
[32] University of Wales, Lampeter.

Most references to research degree examination refer simply to the locus of responsibility or to the existence of regulations for examiners.[33] There is no reference to the examination procedure *per se* or to its evaluation.

11. Student support

There are a number of references to institutions providing their students with handbooks[34] or codes of practice for research students/candidates.[35] These documents are of importance in demonstrating that regulations and provision are in place in most institutions. However, examples of bad practice included a handbook which had not been updated since 1993,[36] and which focused primarily on the regulatory framework; and one, which in comparison to the institution's undergraduate student handbook, contained only very limited information on research and the Graduate School.[37]

The Manchester Metropolitan University report states that handbooks for students and staff are generally 'of a high standard and are informed by centrally provided templates'. This seems to concur with the general premise that all aspects of research training (monitoring, assessment, supervision) display 'good practice' if they have a close relationship with central structures.

12. Research environment

Only one institutional report refers explicitly to the monitoring of facilities and equipment.[38]

13. Student committees

There are many instances of institutions putting in place student liaison committees or similar. For example, the University of Wales, Swansea, has a Graduate School Assembly which is a forum for staff and postgraduate students, reporting to the Graduate School. The University of Warwick has Student Staff Liaison Committees. The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, has a Postgraduate Association which provides a point of contact within the student community and also between students and the university. The University of Westminster has taken a number of initiatives to develop the postgraduate student community in the university, which have included the establishment of a Research Students' Committee.

The purpose of the committees varies – as does the level of input given to the postgraduate community. Cardiff University's Graduate Centre is managed by the Student Services Division and was developed in partnership with the Students Union. The institution is commended for the support given to postgraduate students through the Centre (but see paragraph 14 below).

The presence of student bodies is perceived to be positive. Its absence at one institution contributed to their postgraduate students' belief that they were an 'invisible group'.[39]

14. Graduate teaching assistants

The audit reports indicate questionable practice in the use of postgraduate teaching assistants and their training. The report for Cardiff University, commended for its student support, states that some students were teaching without any training; King's College London needs to ensure that students are properly supervised and trained in a teaching

[33] The University of Manchester, which has robust graduate studies standards in place, only appoints external examiners 'after strict scrutiny and approval by the Board of Postgraduate Management Studies'. Similarly, the University of Warwick has put in place 'appropriate control systems for the appointment of external examiners for research degrees'.
[34] For example, Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Surrey, University of Hull, University of Keele, University of Plymouth, Glamorgan University.
[35] For example, University of Leeds, University of Manchester, University of Southampton.
[36] Napier University.
[37] Anglia University.
[38] Glasgow Caledonian University.
[39] Anglia University.

role. The postgraduate section of the report for Heriot-Watt focused entirely on its use of postgraduate students in a teaching role, but noted that there are no means by which the university could assure itself that students had received proper training or support.

It is obvious that student representation ought to be made at the appropriate level (faculty or school). However, since there are many variations in practice it is difficult to gauge which structure is manifestly 'good practice'. What is important is that research students need to feel they are part of the wider research community, perhaps through more pro-active involvement in seminars and research workshops, interaction with well-established researchers and professors, and sufficient training and support if required to undertake teaching responsibilities.

15. Summary of key observations

Devolving the assurance of quality and standards generally means that there will be risk associated with maintaining standards, particularly if there is devolution to school, department or faculty level. The risks include variations in practice and provision, and practice which does not meet central regulations. The risks are reduced if there are strong central regulations in place and clear lines of communication between central and devolved structures. However there is a danger that this might lead to more bureaucracy.

Admissions procedures are not covered extensively by the audit. Practice that is documented is generally poor. Correct admissions procedures are the crucial first step in ensuring the effective management of the research training process.

There appear to be similar monitoring procedures in most institutions by means of a progress report. Some institutions have implemented a variety of supplementary procedures. Generally the audits do not indicate who is responsible for assuring that reports are read and acted upon. The low number of research students within an institution may have a negative or positive effect on the monitoring process.

There is little coverage of the conversion procedure from MPhil to PhD. The coverage indicates questionable practice but also suggests that there is a need for additional advice/guidance from the HEFCE or in the QAA's code of practice.

The audit reports generally state that supervisory regulations are in place but do not provide detailed descriptions of the level of criteria for appointing supervisors, supervisory training and support.

These details may be contained in supervisory codes of practice that many institutions have in place. The heavy reliance on a small number of supervisors for a large volume of students is perceived to be an example of bad practice.

The audit reports generally state that research training programmes are in place, but do not provide detailed descriptions or information about their compulsory nature nor quality control measures. Research training may be provided centrally and locally. An advantage of central provision is that it brings together students from different disciplines. The sharing of research experience/knowledge between students helps them to create a sense of research community within the university/unit.

There is very little coverage or evaluation of examination procedures.

Student involvement in monitoring and other research training processes is perceived to be entirely positive. Many institutions have student committees. There is little reference to the provision of a research environment. Many institutions using graduate teaching assistants provide little or no training.

Examples of good practice include:

- student induction[40]
- research training[41]

[40] University of Wales, Swansea.

- the strength of student committees[42]
  - student support[43]
  - preparation for teaching role[44]
- developing a research culture[45]
- monitoring research student progress[46]
- comprehensive and robust arrangements for all aspects of research degrees.[47]

Examples of practice which is questionable and should be improved include:

- inconsistent practice across the university in
  - student registration
  - recruiting and inducting students
  - consistency in handbooks
  - MPhil-PhD transfer
- training for postgraduate student teacher assistants
- practice in
  - monitoring student progress
  - monitoring student training
  - university-wide training
- disseminating practice
- procedures for
  - approving project proposals
  - allocating supervisors.

16. Conclusions

The review of audits has proved a worthwhile exercise for extracting examples of good and bad practice, and indicating where procedures are not in place. It has also highlighted some limitations in terms of the audit process itself.

17. Coverage

Since the nature of the audit report is not to discriminate between good and bad practice but to document all practice within an institution, and since reports are concerned with quality and standards at all levels, the information on postgraduate provision was variable. Of the 75 reports reviewed, most the majority gave an overview of current provision for research training, 10 reports contained no reference to postgraduate issues, and only a minority provided a detailed examination.

18. Consistency

The reports do not provide a consistent examination of the key themes of the QAA audit. Institutions with well-established research units/research culture have clear mechanisms to be assessed and scrutinised by the audit team. However there was little information given for those institutions which were not perceived to be research-driven (new universities and/or those with a small number of research students).

19. Concentration

There is typically more concentration on structures for ensuring quality than on detail about procedures. Elements of research degrees that are administrative (such as monitoring) were given more attention than elements such as training and supervision. There was no audit of regulatory or training handbooks, for example.

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[41] University of Wales, Swansea; Aston University.
[42] University of Warwick.
[43] University of Liverpool, University of Wales, Cardiff.
[44] University of Strathclyde.
[45] Aston University, University of Essex.
[46] University of Wales, Swansea.
[47] University of Liverpool.

20. Comprehensiveness

There is a noticeable variation in the comprehensiveness of the information given by the audit teams. Earlier audit reports (1996-97) are very general and descriptive, whilst recent ones (1999-2000) place much more emphasis on procedural aspects and offer a more reflective view of universities' practices in teaching & research.[48]

[48]It might be argued that auditors learned to audit universities from previous experiences thereby improving the process of reporting.

QAA institutional audits

Institution

Anglia Polytechnic University
Ashridge Management College
Aston University

Bell College of Technology
Bournemouth University
Brunel University

Cardiff University
City University
Coventry University
Cranfield University

Glasgow Caledonian University
Guildhall School of Music and Drama

Henley Management College
Heriot-Watt University

King's College London

Liverpool John Moore's University
Loughborough University

The Manchester Metropolitan University

Napier University
Nottingham Trent University

Open University

Queen Mary, University of London
The Queen's University of Belfast

Sheffield Hallam
Southampton Institute

Thames Valley University

University of Aberdeen
University of Bath
University of Birmingham
University of Bradford
University of Brighton

University of Central Lancashire
University College London
University of Dundee
University of Durham
University of East Anglia
University of East London
University of Essex
University of Glamorgan
University of Greenwich
University of Hertfordshire
University of Highlands & Islands Project (UHI)
University of Huddersfield
University of Hull
University of Keele
University of Kent at Canterbury
University of Lancaster
University of Leeds
University of Liverpool
University of Manchester
UMIST (University of Manchester Institute of Science & Technology)
University of North London
University of Nottingham
University of Plymouth
University of Portsmouth
University of Reading
University of Salford
University of Southampton
University of St Andrews
University of Stirling
University of Strathclyde
University of Sunderland
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
University of Teesside
University of Wales, Aberystwyth
University of Wales, Bangor
University of Wales, College of Medicine
University of Wales, Lampeter
University of Wales, Swansea
University of Warwick
University of the West of England, Bristol
University of Westminster
University of Wolverhampton
University of York