



QAA

Outcomes from institutional audit
The contribution of the
student written submission
to institutional audit



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Summary

This paper addresses aspects of students' contributions to institutional audit, viewed through the prism of the 70 audit reports published between 2002 and November 2004. It focuses on the written submissions the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) invites students, through their elected representatives, to compile to brief audit teams.

Students' representatives provide written submissions on a voluntary basis to support the institutional audit process. In this context it should be noted that 66 of the first 70 institutional audits benefited from the provision of a students' written submission. In addition to the written submission, the audit process also provides for meetings between elected and other student officers and QAA audit teams during audit visits, and there is scope for further meetings with elected or volunteer class representatives, and other students during the audit visits.

About a third of the published institutional audit reports describe the different methodologies students have adopted to produce their written submissions, but only a few of the audit reports evaluate the methodology followed in compiling a particular submission. Several of the more evaluative comments on submissions in the audit reports relate to whether their coverage has extended to students other than mainstream undergraduates, and a number of reports note the absence of information from the perspectives of research students and students in partner institutions. It may be that the voluntary nature of the written submission accounts has contributed to the cautious courtesy with which audit teams appear to have approached many of them.

It is clear that in their written submissions, most students agree in general terms with the views taken by their institutions in their self-evaluation documents. The audit reports contain relatively few references to discrepancies between self-evaluation documents and written submissions. Where these have been encountered, it is clear that audit teams have taken care to follow up conflicting statements and to establish the facts of the matter.

Overall, comments in written submissions about institutional arrangements have focused on learning and student support, particularly library and information technology provision and personal tutoring arrangements (generally valued and, though criticised for variability, never harshly so); student representation and the handling of evaluative feedback (both typically described as variable at departmental or programme level, but especially valued when complimented by informal opportunities to communicate views and facilitate change); and accuracy of information. In the case of the latter, published information was generally found to be accurate, though criticisms were made of the timeliness with which information on even quite major institutional changes was provided, with a particular difficulty in publicising year-on-year changes to elective and optional courses and modules.

It is clear that students' written submissions have made a significant contribution to institutional audit through the information and insight they have afforded to students' views on their learning experiences. The audit reports also clearly show that the value of the written submission goes beyond its immediate contribution to institutional audit. In a significant number of cases, the reports show that institutions have readily accepted their students' written submissions as an important source of information in the work of enhancing their quality management and academic standards arrangements.

Preface

An objective of institutional audit is 'to contribute, in conjunction with other mechanisms, to the promotion and enhancement of high quality in teaching and learning'. One of the ways in which this can be accomplished is through identifying features of good practice across the reports and areas where reports have commonly offered recommendations for improvement.

In due course, QAA intends to produce an extended reflection on institutional audit in the *Learning from audit* series, but since the final institutional audit reports in the present audit cycle were not published until spring 2006, *Learning from institutional audit* is unlikely to be published before late 2007. To give institutions and other stakeholders more timely information, QAA has therefore decided to produce a series of short working papers, describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the audit reports, to be published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (hereafter, *Outcomes...*).

This first series of *Outcomes...* papers is based on the 70 institutional audit reports published by the end of November 2004. The second series will draw on institutional audit reports published following the 2004-05 audits, and it is likely that there will be some overlap in topics between the first and second series. The topics in this first series are listed in Appendix 3. Papers in each series are perhaps best seen as 'work in progress'. Although QAA retains copyright in the contents of the *Outcomes...* papers, they can be freely downloaded from QAA's website and cited, with acknowledgement.

Introduction

1 This paper draws on the institutional audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004 and is in three parts. The first part, which includes this introduction, outlines how the student written submission contributes to institutional audit, including its place in the audit process. The second part discusses how institutional audit teams work with the written submission and the third part outlines some of the common themes raised in written submissions. The paper concludes with some observations on the wider contribution of written submissions to institutions' work to support the quality of their provision and safeguard the academic standards of their awards.

2 It should be emphasised from the outset that in preparing this paper no student written submissions were consulted directly: all the material relating to the submissions has been drawn from the audit reports. Necessarily, in each part there is some overlap with comments and observations in other *Outcomes...* papers.

Part 1

The status of the student written submission in institutional audit

3 QAA's formal remit is to audit and report on how institutions providing higher education manage the quality of the learning opportunities and learning support arrangements they make available for students, and how they safeguard the academic standards of the academic awards for which they have responsibility. Additionally, in its *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* QAA states that 'at the centre of the [institutional audit] process is an emphasis on students - in terms of the quality of the information they receive about their programmes of study, the ways in which their learning is facilitated and supported, and the academic standards they are expected to achieve, and do achieve in practice'. From the beginning of institutional audit, therefore, QAA has actively sought students' participation in the audit process, by inviting them to make a written submission to brief the audit team before it visited the institution, and through meetings with elected and other student officers, elected or volunteer class representatives, and other students.

4 QAA's remit does not extend to students' representative bodies: institutional audit reports do not, therefore, comment on the internal arrangements of students' representative bodies and, while institutions in England and Northern Ireland are expected to participate in institutional audit by their respective funding bodies and to provide a self-evaluation document for audit, there is no equivalent expectation that students' representatives will provide a written submission. Hence, while the template QAA provided from 2002 to 2006 for its audit teams to use in drafting an institutional audit report prompted them to comment explicitly on the character of the institution's self-evaluation document, QAA did not expect reports to comment similarly on the nature of the student written submission or the contribution students had made to an individual audit - although some did. For the reasons outlined, audit reports do not identify features of good practice associated with written submissions. Hence, this *Outcomes...* paper differs from others in that it does not open with a list of features of good practice, cross-referenced to paragraphs in the audit reports.

5 To support student participation in institutional audit, QAA's *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002) included an Annex [Annex D] which described what might helpfully be included in a student written submission. It also provided group briefings for student representatives, in partnership with the National Union of Students (NUS), at events held under the NUS Quality Takes Time banner. In 2003, QAA published a booklet, *Institutional audit: a guide for student representatives*, which continues to be available in an updated form at www.qaa.ac.uk/students/guides/institauditguide06.asp

The student written submission in the institutional audit process

6 The standard arrangement for an institutional audit from 2002-06 provided for the QAA Assistant Director coordinating the audit to visit the institution for a preliminary meeting with its representatives. At the same time, or on a separate occasion, QAA also expected the Assistant Director to seek an opportunity to meet students' representatives without institutional staff being present, to brief them on the audit process and to learn whether they would be able to provide a written submission to support the audit. As part of this meeting the Assistant Director was expected to explain the purpose of the written submission in helping the team understand students' views on the following areas:

- how the institution manages the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for them
- the extent to which students' views are taken into account by the institution
- their experiences of the accuracy of the institution's published and other information and advice it provides for them, and
- how the institution works with students' representatives more generally.

The *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002) stated that written submissions could be made to QAA in confidence and, that in such circumstances, the written submission would not be shared with the institution or discussed with staff or students during the team's two visits. At this first meeting with students' representatives, the QAA Assistant Director was therefore expected to ask whether any written submission would be shared with the institution. In the audit reports published by November 2004 only one written submission was stated not to have been shared with the institution while another was shared only with the institution's senior managers.

7 Institutional audits generally only take place when there are opportunities for QAA teams to meet taught and research students. Since the preparations for an institutional audit usually began up to seven months before the audit team's visits to the institution, the preliminary visit described above might need to be undertaken during handover periods between student executives, or in the middle of traditional vacation periods. Where the audit team's briefing visit took place in the first part of the academic session (that is, before Christmas) it can be taken that students' preparations, including the compilation of the written submission, would necessarily have spanned two academic sessions.

8 In institutional audit, if the students' representative body decided to submit a written submission, it was asked to do so at about the same time the institution was scheduled to submit its own self-evaluation document. In the institutional audits governed by the *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* this was usually about 18 weeks prior to the main audit visit, allowing for public holidays. Overall, although the institutional audit process did not, and since 2006, does not, require a student written submission, only four of the 70 audit reports published by November 2004 state that the relevant students' representative bodies had not made a written submission. Of these, two audit reports stated that a written submission had not been provided because students' representatives had endorsed their institution's self-evaluation document and had nothing to add to its contents. No reasons were offered in the other two reports.

9 The standard programme for the institutional briefing visit, which in the audit covered by the *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* took place five weeks before the audit visit, provided opportunities for the audit team to meet the institution's Chief Executive, its senior managers and, in a separate meeting, representatives from the student body. The chief purpose of these meetings was to enable the audit team to check its understanding of the institution's self-evaluation document with members of staff and, likewise, its understanding of the written submission with students' representatives and to be briefed on any changes which have taken place since the self-evaluation document and the students' written submission were provided to QAA.

10 In line with the circumstances described in paragraph 7 above, when the compilation of a written submission spanned two academic sessions, discussions with students' representatives could centre on submissions put together by their predecessors. In such cases, this can mean that there is only a brief opportunity for the audit team to discuss with those most closely involved in the preparation of the written submission the details of their preparations and how the institution has responded to the submission.

How students prepare their written submissions

11 QAA's guidance in Annex D of the *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* invited those preparing the written submission to 'include a written statement of how it has been compiled, its authorship, and the extent to which its contents have been shared with and endorsed by the student body as a whole'. Such information might be expected to offer the audit team an indication of how representative the written submission is of the views of the student body as a whole. Although none of the first 70 reports formally confirmed that this expectation had been met, it was often apparent from the tenor of individual audit reports that it had.

12 Of the audit reports which indicated that students had made a written submission, about one third indicated that the written submission had 'stated and explained' the methodology which had been followed in its compilation. Of these, two indicated that the written submission had been based solely on the analysis of responses to a questionnaire circulated among students; two stated that their compilation had been supported by the use of mixed methods, including email

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questionnaires, email consultations of course representatives via the representative body's website and meetings with the latter; and two submissions stated that they had analysed the institution's own records of the feedback it had received from its students, including institution wide surveys.

13 As noted in paragraph 4, comments on arrangements made by students' representative bodies fall outside QAA's remit and, possibly for that reason, few institutional audit reports attempt to evaluate the methodology followed in compiling a written submission. Several audit reports do, however, comment on whether the written submission had included material extending its coverage to minority students, including research students. Overall, comments on written submissions in the audit reports tend towards a kind of cautious courtesy. It has been suggested that in the absence of more overt statements in audit reports about those features in written submissions which have been found helpful, and what tends to make the presentation of evidence in written submissions more persuasive, it may be difficult for students compiling them to identify how written submissions might be improved. For the foreseeable future, more overt comments may continue to be precluded by the voluntaristic nature of the written submission.

Part 2

How institutional audit teams work with the written submission

14 In institutional audit, the students' written submission forms a significant, but not the only or most important, element in the information drawn on by an audit team in conducting its enquiries and compiling its report. Other elements include the institution's self-evaluation document, reports of previous QAA engagements with the institution and how these have been followed up, information from the institution's documents and intranet and website, information published under the Teaching Quality Information initiative, and information provided through meetings with staff and students. QAA audit teams are expected to use the self-evaluation document as their primary source of information for the audit.

15 When coming to a view on a particular matter, QAA audit teams are expected to 'triangulate' the sources of information which they use. They are expected to test the reliability of one source and its information and interpretation with reference to other sources. Where the sources agree, teams are advised that they can rely on their accounts unless and until discrepancies are encountered, and that discrepancies in facts and their interpretation between sources should be followed up.

Cases where there is conflicting information in the written submission and the self-evaluation document

16 Some early comments on the role of the written submission in institutional audit suggested that it might constitute a counter to the institution's self-evaluation document. On the basis of the audit reports published by November 2004, this has not been the case, with a majority of written submissions broadly coinciding in their views of institutional arrangements with those advanced in the relevant self-evaluation documents.

17 Not all audit reports comment specifically on the match between the views put forward in the written submission and in the self-evaluation document. In these cases, it might reasonably be assumed that there was broad agreement. Some audit reports do, however, comment on discrepancies between information in the written submission and in the self-evaluation document. The following paragraphs draw on these reports.

18 Overall, the number of cases where enquiries by audit teams established that self-evaluation documents stated matters more accurately than the written submission, or vice versa, is too few to support generalisation. Each case does, however, demonstrate the care taken to establish the facts of each of the matters in question, through requesting additional information and conducting discussions with staff and students.

Cases where information offered by students in meetings with the audit team conflicted with information in the written submission

19 Consideration of the audit reports published by November 2004 shows slightly more cases of inconsistencies between the written submission and views or information imparted by students to members of the audit team in meetings than those mentioned above. In respect of differences between the written submission and student meetings, the written submission has on occasion been used as a basis against which to test student views, much as the self-evaluation document is used as a basis to explore matters through an institution's internal papers and with its staff and students. In some cases it would appear that views expressed by students in meetings had caused the reappraisal of the views set out in the written submission. In one case, this led to an audit report identifying institutional arrangements as a feature of good practice about which the written submission had expressed reservations. In another report it led to the expression of some reservations, not extending to a recommendation, about the relevant institution's arrangements. As observed in paragraph 18 above, what is common in such instances is the care taken by audit teams to follow up statements in both the written submission and the self-evaluation documents.

Part 3

Main areas for comment in written submissions

20 The main areas for comment in written submissions, as judged by the number of citations of written submissions in the audit reports, relate to learning resources, academic guidance and personal support, student representation and feedback, and published and student information. In addition to these areas, about one fifth of submissions appear, from the audit reports, to have offered perspectives on how institutions manage the quality of their provision and the academic standards of their awards. While seven institutional audit reports refer to comments in the written submission on assessment and external examining, only one was said to have referred in detail to the sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* and to have 'highlighted positive recent developments in [the institution] in a range of areas, while drawing attention to a number of matters, particularly relating to graduate students, on which it felt that further action was desirable'.

21 It is noteworthy that only one institutional audit report states that the written submission had referred to the institution's collaborative provision, other than in passing. In that case, the reference was to a matter to do with progression from a Higher National Diploma studied at a partner institution to degree-level study at the institution itself.

Learning support, including learning resources and academic guidance and personal support

22 References to comments drawn from written submissions on learning resources and support arrangements can be found in 75 per cent of the institutional audit reports. In some reports, there are references to the written submission in the reports' discussions of both learning resources and guidance and support for students. Overall, more than half of the audit reports refer to each of these areas.

23 When dealing with institutions' arrangements to manage their learning resources, more than a third of the audit reports cite information from the written submission offering an overall assessment of students' perceptions of their effectiveness. In most cases these were positive in tone. Where comments cited from the written submission were not positive, they included, in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned, concerns about lack of study space (10 per cent of audit reports), variations in the level of book and journal provision between campuses in the same institution (10 per cent of reports), the availability of books (eight per cent of reports) and opening hours (seven per cent of reports).

24 Other audit reports, however, noted the responsiveness of the relevant institutions to student comments and feedback on learning resources. In one case, for example, an audit report noted that student concerns about the use of library space for teaching, which had featured in the written submission were shared by the institution. In another case, the institution had adjusted weekend opening hours in response to student concerns, while in two other institutions information from the written submission was cited to the effect that a number of library problems had recently been resolved.

25 When considering access to personal computing and printing facilities for students, nearly half of the audit reports published by November 2004 cited comments from the written submission about students' perceptions of the nature of the service institutions were providing. Of these, about a third referred to the availability of computers, mostly in negative terms. Comments associated with such negative views tended to be linked with access to facilities, particularly at peak times, though a small number were critical of the helpfulness or effectiveness of support from information and communication technology staff, balanced in some cases by recognition that matters were being addressed. One audit report, in discussing the institution's learning resources, noted the full and balanced discussion of these matters in the written submission which, while complimentary about resource centres, was 'less positive about the [information technology] equipment available in learning centres and there was some criticism of the lack of quiet places to work'.

Comments in written submissions on student and learning support

26 Almost 30 per cent of the audit reports published by November 2004 cited comments drawn from written submissions on 'student and learning support generally' which were mostly positive, though sometimes with significant qualifications. In some cases, observations in the relevant audit reports suggest that negative comments might have stemmed from a lack of awareness on the part of those compiling the written submission of the learning resources available to students.

27 There are observations based on comments in written submissions in more than 30 per cent of the audit reports on the variable nature of personal tutorial support available to students across institutions. In almost half of these reports, the comments are critical, although not sharply so. Almost the same number of reports take a more positive view, acknowledging variations in the provision of tutorial support while still expressing confidence in the system overall. In other reports, statements of satisfaction with the personal tutorial support provided was unequivocal. At one institution, for example, the written submission was cited as stating that 'more than 60 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the support they received from their personal tutor and more than 70 per cent were satisfied with the advice and support they received from the office from which their course was administered'. Of another institution, the audit report cited the written submission as stating that 'the majority of students identified their personal tutor as a key source of support for academic difficulties'.

28 Fewer than 10 per cent of the audit reports cited comments (mostly negative) in written submissions to the support given by institutions to their international students, while a corresponding number cited (mostly positive) comments in written submissions for support for students with a disability, including references to the provision of additional learning support. *Outcomes from institutional audit: Arrangements for international students* provides further information on this area of institutions' work.

29 There are comments drawn from written submissions on supervision and support facilities for research students in about 10 per cent of the audit reports published by 2004. Of these, a minority of the comments are positive but the negative comments mostly derive from two areas: difficulties of various kinds with the relationship between research students and their supervisors, and weaknesses in academic and personal support for research students, including, but not limited to, support for research students during undergraduate vacation periods.

30 From the institutional audit reports, employment-related matters are stated as having been addressed in the written submission in two ways: as a comment on institutions' careers services (the reports that contained such references were split in their evaluation) and on contacts with employers and the integration of 'employability' as a topic into the curriculum. It is not possible from the evidence available in the audit reports to offer a view on the overall character of comments in written submissions on careers provision, employment and employability.

31 Overall, the evidence from the audit reports about the character of comments in written submissions on learning and personal support suggests that they take the view that the strengths of institutions' arrangements outweigh their weaknesses. There appears to be an assumption in many of the extracts from written submissions

cited in the reports that at least some of the weaknesses they identify, particularly with respect to tutorial arrangements, derive from systems which expect most teaching staff to share in the responsibility for overseeing and supporting the academic and personal well-being of students. There is no suggestion, however, that the nature or scale of the weaknesses identified were such as to devalue the usefulness to students of having such broad-based arrangements, with their student-centred ethos.

Student representation and student feedback to institutions

32 More than half the institutional audit reports published by November 2004 contain one or more references to comments made in the written submission to the institution's arrangements for student representation. About one in six of the audit reports contain observations which indicate the written submission had commented on institutional responses to evaluative feedback from students.

33 From the audit reports published by November 2004, it seems that systems of student representation were viewed by those compiling written submissions as the primary means through which they could engage with institutional managers on committees which ranged from governing and supreme academic bodies, to programme-level bodies dealing with everyday and more immediate matters.

34 Most of the audit reports which contain comments drawn from the student submission about representation simply confirm the nature of the formal rights to representation enjoyed by students. At institutional and departmental level, a small number of reports refer to comments in the written submission which indicate student disquiet with the basis for identifying or electing individuals to represent them. Overwhelmingly, however, references in the audit reports to the character of institution-level discussions, and other contacts between students' representatives and senior managers, indicate the existence of constructive working relationships between them. Indeed, a few reports refer positively to institutional responsiveness and collaborative engagement with students' representatives to deal with mutually acknowledged problems.

35 At departmental, programme, and course level, however, information in the audit reports drawn from written submissions presents a more mixed picture. Here, almost half of those reports which refer to representation arrangements contain comments referring back to written submissions which are, to some extent, critical of the degree of variability with which representation arrangements work across the relevant institutions.

36 In one case, for example, the audit report stated that the 'written submission confirmed the effectiveness of representation at the University level, but drew attention to difficulties with the course representative system which, in the view of the [student representative body had been]...almost defunct in the [previous session] but had been revived for the [present session]'. In another audit report, the written submission was cited as having stated that 'the [representation] system allows for positive methods of communication, yet is only effective when there is a representative in position...the main concern was the quality of feedback to students on decisions, especially at subject level'.

37 In several institutional audit reports, written submissions were stated to have offered the view that informality in representation arrangements had its place, and might be preferable to a heavily bureaucratic approach. Almost all such instances were associated with the views of students' representatives in small institutions. One such report cited the submission as stating that 'formal procedures could seem slow and laborious. In another small institution, with a student population of less than 1,000, the written submission observed that formal meetings took place irregularly, but that they were nonetheless 'valuable'. In this case, the audit report came to the view that 'the student voice is clearly heard, and that students have ample informal opportunities to communicate their views at programme and college levels'.

38 Overall, written submissions appear to speak especially positively of situations where formal representation is complemented by a range of informal opportunities for students to express their views, and secure an institutional response. Where a culture of collegiality and informality exists, students appear to be more understanding of omissions and errors than where staff-student relations and student representation depend on a high degree of formality.

39 One audit report noted that the relevant students' submission had suggested a need for student representatives to be able to attend planning, resources and estates committees so that they could learn of proposed changes to the institution's estates and learning resources while they were at a formative stage. Another report suggested that it would be helpful for students to be represented on those of the institution's committees which dealt with financial support for students.

Views in student submissions of other institutional arrangements for gathering feedback from students

40 Just under one in five of the audit reports published by November 2004 cite comments from written submissions on institutional feedback questionnaires, with one in 10 stated to have described institutional handling of them as variable. One audit report, for example, stated that the written submission had suggested that the lack of information provided about institutional responses to questionnaires 'might reduce student willingness to complete the forms'. Another report quoted material from the written submission which stated that University guidelines on feedback and course monitoring had been adopted 'very recently' and that feedback on matters raised by students could be 'woefully slow', adding that 'the majority of students fill in lecture evaluation questionnaires...but few know what happens to the responses'.

41 Yet another audit report, citing the written submission, noted its emphasis on variability in securing and handling student feedback on their learning experiences across the institution, noting the desirability of establishing minimum standards, reporting that while some departments were conducting 'very good research' into student opinion, others were doing 'only a minimal amount'. Similar points are to be found in several other reports. In one, the written submission was noted as having cited the findings of a questionnaire survey drawing attention to students' low level of engagement with the survey process.

42 To set alongside this, three audit reports were able to cite positive comments in the respective written submissions on how the relevant institutions had responded to student feedback. In one such report, feedback to students was described 'as being carried out regularly and in an understandable form'. In another report, the written submission was reported as taking the view that 'feedback from evaluation questionnaires is seriously considered at the programme boards and action taken where necessary', while in another, the written submission was stated as having 'praised the institution's mechanisms for gathering student feedback [and to have] noted the Student Satisfaction Survey in which it is directly involved as "a positive form of evaluation" and the "practical responses from the University are excellent"'.

The provision of information, including published information, for students

43 There are comments, in a number of the institutional audit reports, on perceptions of how information is provided for continuing students by their institutions, with negative comments in several reports. In some cases, the reports note that the institutions concerned were able to point to instances where information had been provided for students of which the latter were unaware. Several audit reports note critical comments in written submissions about the way in which the relevant institutions had communicated major changes to school structures or degree classification arrangements to students.

44 With respect to the accuracy of published information, more than half of the audit reports cite comments in the relevant written submissions on published or other information provided to students. This reflects the importance vested in the institutional audit method in establishing the accuracy, completeness, honesty and reliability of the information institutions provide for their stakeholders, and particularly their students.

45 Most comments on the accuracy of information provided for institutions for their students were positive and, importantly, there was little evidence that institutions had significantly misrepresented themselves. Where there were critical comments in the audit reports, drawn from written submissions, these generally related to supposed failures to provide immediate information about organisational changes. From these comments, it is clear that the withdrawal of elective or optional courses or modules, between the time of a student's application and their arrival, gave rise to disappointment.

46 In one such instance, for example, an audit report which had been alerted to this matter by the written submission, drew attention to 'low levels of satisfaction with the [institution's] general communication with students, particularly about changes'. Another audit report, supporting the relevant written submission, found 'some uncertainty over the implementation of some courses' at postgraduate level, and drew attention to aspects of the postgraduate prospectus. Other reports found difficulties with inadequate information being provided for students prior to their arrival, either via electronic media or paper copies. In other audit reports, comments in written submissions about the provision of deficient information on modules, and particularly elective or optional modules in written submissions which had been followed up by audit teams, gave rise to critical comments in the relevant reports.

47 A serious matter was noted in one report which cited comments in the written submission alerting the audit team that a programme had not been accredited by the relevant and most important professional body for the field, with the consequence that graduates from the programme would be 'required to undertake additional study elsewhere in order to achieve professional status'. The institution acknowledged that students joining the programme had not been alerted to its status regarding the professional body and had amended its prospectuses and other published information accordingly before the audit visit. In this instance, the audit report stated that the institution 'will be aware of the need to be vigilant in these matters, to ensure that students are provided with full and accurate information that enables them to make informed choices about where to study before registering to study'.

48 Comments in written submissions on the accuracy and reliability of information published by institutions were informed in a number of cases by the results of surveys of students' views. In one instance, an audit report cited information from a written submission based on a survey which stated that '78 per cent of those students whose views contributed to the report described the [institution's] information as a fair representation of student life'. Drawing conclusions from figures cited in some other audit reports, taken from written submissions, was made more difficult by a low response rates to the questionnaire in one case and to equivocally stated results in another.

Management of quality and standards

49 The *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* and the QAA template for the institutional audit report each encourage audit teams to discuss with staff and students how the institution enables its students to contribute to managing the quality of learning opportunities and to safeguarding the academic standards of its awards. Of the institutional audit reports published by November 2004, information drawn from written submissions is cited in only one in five reports. This may, however, derive from overlap between this section and other sections of the institutional audit report.

50 In about half of the institutional audit reports which drew on written submissions to discuss institutions' management of quality and academic standards, students were said to be generally satisfied with the relevant institutional arrangements. Two reports cited the relevant written submissions as stating that students considered that they played a significant role in decision-making about quality management and academic standards and another cited favourable comments in the written submission about teaching quality. No report cited significant criticisms of institutions' quality and academic standards management arrangements drawn from the written submission, and such reservations as were expressed are not readily amenable to synthesis.

Conclusion

The written submission as a stimulus to institutional policy or practice

51 From 2002-06, the fact that the written submission and the institution's self-evaluation document were submitted simultaneously, 18 weeks before to the audit, created the potential for the written submission to stimulate institutions to amend or enhance their policies and practices. This appears to have happened in one in 10 of the institutional audits conducted between 2002 and summer 2004, although the number of indirect references to such occurrences in the audit reports and elsewhere suggests that this may understate the frequency with which this had taken place. It is also worth noting that in a few cases a prompt institutional response to student concerns expressed in the written submission gave rise to favourable comment in the subsequent audit reports. In some cases, the changes made seem to constitute genuine enhancements. In other cases, the changes may have taken the form of more immediate and tactical adjustments to library and learning resource arrangements, and student representation to improve the position before the audit.

52 In other cases, however, there is clear evidence in the audit reports that institutions have taken care to analyse the contents of the written submissions made by their students in order to respond appropriately. For example, in one case, an institution acted immediately to respond to concerns expressed in the written submission by enhancing its assessment arrangements. In another, the audit report noted that the institution had provided the audit team with a paper containing its analysis of the written submission, identifying a number of matters to do with academic guidance and support which its own quality management arrangements had not hitherto brought to its attention.

53 Likewise another institution indicated its intention to 'make constructive use of the outcomes of the written submission'. It was stated in the audit report that to do this, the institution was 'preparing a response to the issues of concern identified in the written submission'. It intended to consult with its schools and services and to put a formal response to the written submission to a senior committee in the near future. Several other institutions were reported to be adopting similarly positive approaches to using the written submission to inform their quality management and academic standards arrangements.

Closing observations

54 Many of the institutional audit reports published by November 2004 handle the relevant written submissions, and the information they contain, with a degree of caution not evident in their references to the institutions' self-evaluation documents. Hence, few audit reports describe or offer a critique of the methods adopted in compiling written submissions. Furthermore, although QAA invites authors producing written submissions to ensure that they are 'appropriately balanced between analysis and description', the template for the institutional audit reports does not require or invite audit teams to comment on the extent to which a written submission has achieved such a balance. One consequence of this caution is that even where a written submission is described in an audit report as 'valuable', but is not referred to

subsequently, it is difficult to judge whether the adjective represents an evaluation of the submission or, assuming it is an evaluation, in what ways the written submission was valuable and how it contributed to the audit process and the audit report.

55 Overall, and as presented in the relevant institutional audit reports, written submissions appeared to be collaborative rather than confrontational in tone. A few reports referred to collaborative engagement by students' representative bodies with institutions to address mutually acknowledged problems, and some reported institutional responsiveness to student concerns, though where this related to the written submission, the proximity of the institutional audit may have been a consideration.

56 Where written submissions are stated in audit reports as having expressed concerns about institutional arrangements, however, such concerns tend to be in the areas of learning and student support, generally valued and, though criticised for variability, never harshly so; student representation and the handling of evaluative feedback, both typically described as variable at departmental or programme level but especially valued when complimented by informal opportunities to communicate views and facilitate change; and accuracy of information. In the case of the latter, published information was generally found to be accurate, though criticisms were made of the timeliness with which information on even quite major institutional changes was provided, with a particular difficulty in publicising year-on-year changes to elective and optional courses and modules.

57 On balance, the institutional audit reports confirm that the written submission, helps to set the stage for audit. So far as the self-evaluation document is concerned, its primacy as a source for the audit is laid down in the *Handbook for institutional audit: England* (2002), bolstered by the fact that the period between the submission of the self-evaluation document to QAA and the audit visits provides an opportunity for the institution to respond to the written submission. But, with respect to information gathered from students in meetings, the possibility cannot be excluded that some audit teams may find statements made in the immediacy of meetings more persuasive than the contents of a written submission produced several months earlier, particularly where the submission has not been forthcoming on how it has been compiled and the limitations of its evidence. The written submission may occasionally also be used as a template against which to establish student views. If this is so, and the evidence for it is not conclusive, it may be helpful for audit teams to pay greater attention to the methodology and scope of the written submission in order for them to assign to it an influence commensurate with its reliability.

58 Finally, it is clear that students' written submissions have made a significant contribution to institutional audit through the information and insight they have afforded to students' views on their learning experiences. The evidence of the audit reports published by November 2004 also makes it plain, however, that the value of the written submission goes beyond its immediate contribution to institutional audit. In a significant number of cases, institutions have readily accepted their students' written submissions as an important source of information in the work of enhancing their quality management and academic standards arrangements.

Appendix 1 - The institutional audit reports

2002-03

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

2003-04

University of Bath, October 2003
University of Bradford, November 2003
University of Buckingham, November 2003
University of Essex, November 2003
University of Exeter, November 2003
University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, November 2003
University of Sheffield, November 2003
Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, December 2003
Royal Agricultural College, December 2003
University of Southampton, December 2003
St Martin's College, Lancaster, December 2003

The contribution of the student written submission to institutional audit

University of Surrey, Roehampton, December 2003
University of York, December 2003
University of East Anglia, January 2004
University of Durham, February 2004
University of Liverpool, February 2004
Writtle College, February 2004
Bournemouth University, March 2004
The Institute of Cancer Research, March 2004
University of Kent, March 2004
University of Leeds, March 2004
Loughborough University, March 2004
Open University, March 2004
University of Oxford, March 2004
University of Salford, March 2004
University of Warwick, March 2004
University of Wolverhampton, March 2004
Aston University, April 2004
University of Birmingham, April 2004
University of Bristol, April 2004
University of Central Lancashire, April 2004
Coventry University, April 2004
The London Institute, April 2004
University of Portsmouth, April 2004
Anglia Polytechnic University, May 2004
University of Brighton, May 2004
Brunel University, May 2004
University of Keele, May 2004
The Nottingham Trent University, May 2004
University of Reading, May 2004
University of Sussex, May 2004
Wimbledon School of Art, May 2004
University of Greenwich, June 2004
King's College London, June 2004
University of Lancaster, June 2004
The Manchester Metropolitan University, June 2004

Appendix 2 - Reports on specialist institutions

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

Appendix 3 - Titles of *Outcomes* from institutional audit papers, Series 1

In most cases, *Outcomes...* papers will be no longer than 15 sides of A4. They are published on QAA's website to assist ready access. QAA retains copyright in the *Outcomes...* papers, but as noted earlier, they may be freely used with acknowledgement.

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

Title	Publishing date
Initial overview	April 2005
External examiners and their reports	April 2005
Programme specifications	April 2005
Staff support and development arrangements	October 2005
Student representation and feedback arrangements	November 2005
Programme monitoring arrangements	January 2006
Assessment of students	January 2006
Learning support resources, including virtual learning environment	January 2006
Validation and approval of new provision and periodic review	January 2006
Work-based and placement learning, and employability	March 2006
Arrangements for international students	March 2006
Progression and completion statistics	March 2006
Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports	March 2006
Specialist institutions	July 2006
The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland	July 2006
Subject benchmark statements	September 2006
Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degree programmes	October 2006
Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies	October 2006
Academic guidance, support and supervision, and personal support and guidance	October 2006
Institutions' support for e-learning	October 2006
Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards	December 2006

Outcomes from institutional audit

Institutions' support for widening participation and access to higher education	December 2006
The contribution of the student written submission to institutional audit	March 2007
The contribution of the self-evaluation document to institutional audit	tbc
Series 1 overview	tbc

Appendix 4 - Methodology

The methodology followed in analysing the institutional audit reports uses the headings set out in Annex H of the *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* to subdivide the Summary, Main report and Findings sections of the institutional audit reports into broad areas. An example from the Main report is 'The institution's framework for managing quality and standards, including collaborative provision'.

For each published report, the text was taken from the Adobe Acrobat® documents published on the QAA website and converted to plain text format. The resulting files were checked for accuracy and coded into sections following the template used to construct the institutional audit reports. In addition, the text of each report was tagged with information providing the date the report was published and some basic characteristics of the institution (base data). The reports were then introduced into a qualitative research software package, QSR N6®. The software provides a wide range of tools to support indexing and searching and allows features of interest to be coded for further investigation.

An audit team's judgements, its identification of features of good practice, and its recommendations appear at two points in an institutional audit report: the Summary and at the end of the Findings; it is only in the latter, however, that cross references to the paragraphs in the Main report are to be found, and it is here that the grounds for identifying a feature of good practice, offering a recommendation and making a judgement are set out. These cross references have been used to locate features of good practice and recommendations to the particular sections of the report to which they refer.

Individual papers in the *Outcomes...* series are compiled by QAA staff and experienced institutional auditors. To assist in compiling the papers, reports produced by QSR N6® have been made available to provide a broad picture of the overall distribution of features of good practice and recommendations in particular areas, as seen by the audit teams.

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