



Outcomes from institutional audit

External examiners and their reports



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Summary

Overall, the published audit reports show that institutions have established external examining processes and procedures which are working well and are effective.

There are 13 features of good practice cited in 12 reports. These identify strengths in individual institutions in the nomination, appointment and preparation of external examiners, in the communication and liaison channels established between institutions and their external examiners, and in the use made of reports from the latter within the institutions concerned. There are 15 recommendations in the reports advising action to in connection with external examining arrangements. Six recommendations are offered in the reports for action that would be desirable.

Most institutions have effective systems in place for the nomination and appointment of external examiners and to enable them to carry out their responsibilities. Less satisfactory arrangements may result where responsibility for inducting and supporting external examiners is not clearly stated, and where institutional information and supporting materials are not provided for external examiners or are deficient. Many institutions maintain central records of external examiners' appointments which can helpfully serve a range of internal purposes.

Most external examiners' reports fully address the range of matters on which they are required to comment. In a few cases, however, institutions have found it necessary to return external examiners' reports to them for further work. Several audits have found external examiners' reports which have not referred to the Academic Infrastructure. Where external examiners' reports are provided late or not at all this may hamper the effective working of institutions' internal monitoring and review arrangements. Mechanisms to check for, and track the receipt of external examiners' reports have then been recommended.

External examiners' reports are generally considered at institutional and local levels. In most cases the reports have found clear arrangements for responding to external examiners, which define where responsibility lies for taking action and checking that it has been completed. There are several instances, however, where institutions working in partnership with others have not maintained arrangements to provide staff supporting collaborative provision with access to external examiners' or their reports.

Institutional overviews of external examiners' reports are becoming more general. Where adopted, they can help to identify trends and matters for institution-wide attention. They can also highlight good practice and assist in its dissemination. When such institutional overview reports are sent to external examiners, this can help the latter to locate their work within a wider institutional-level context.

Reports by external examiners generally contribute to annual monitoring and may contribute to periodic review. In some institutions annual monitoring reports are the only route through which external examiners' comments may reach senior layers in the institution. Several audit reports have commented on the need for such reports to be frank and complete, lest matters requiring attention go unreported.

Institutions have updated their documentation and procedures for external examining to enable them to meet the requirements of HEFCE for summaries of external examiners' reports to be published as part of the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) set required by *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance (HEFCE 03/51)*.

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 will not be published until Spring 2006, *Learning from institutional audit* is unlikely to be published before late 2006. 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...*).

A feature of good practice in institutional audit is considered to be a process, a practice, or a way of handling matters which, in the context of the particular institution, is improving, or leading to the improvement of, the management of quality and/or academic standards, and learning and teaching. *Outcomes...* papers are intended to provide readers with pointers to where features of good practice relating to particular topics can be located in the published audit reports. Each *Outcomes...* paper therefore identifies the features of good practice in individual reports associated with the particular topic. A note on the topics identified for the first series of *Outcomes...* papers, to be published throughout 2005, can be found at Appendix 3 (page 18). It should be emphasised that the features of good practice mentioned in this paper should be considered in their proper institutional context, and that each is perhaps best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as a model for emulation.

The 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. 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 and general overview

1 This paper is based on a detailed consideration of the 70 institutional audit reports published by 5 November 2004 (see Appendix 1, page 14). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in the *Outcomes...* series can be found in Appendix 4 (page 19).

2 External examiners have a key role to play in ensuring that comparable standards are maintained in the UK's system of higher education. As independent advisers providing institutions with informed comment on the academic standards set and

student achievement in relation to those standards, they constitute an integral and essential part of institutional quality assurance. Consequently, audit teams are asked to comment on how institutions work with their external examiners and the use institutions make of their reports. The *Handbook for institutional audit: England* indicates that a judgement of broad confidence in an institution's present and likely future quality and academic standards arrangements implies that it is making strong and scrupulous use of independent external examiners in summative assessment procedures.

3 The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), *Section 4: External examining*, was first issued in 2000 and was revised in 2003-04. An updated version was issued in 2004 (*Code of practice, Section 4, 2004*) although the two versions do not differ substantially. Necessarily, therefore, the institutional audit reports published up until November 2004 referred to the version of the *Code of practice, Section 4* published in 2000 (*Code of practice, Section 4, 2000*).

4 It is clear from the 70 published audit reports that, in general, external examining arrangements are working effectively. Institutions continue to take account of the *Code of practice, Section 4, 2000* in the further development and refinement of their external examining procedures and processes. Audits have found clear evidence of institutions updating their documentation and procedures for external examining, with a view to addressing the requirements of HEFCE for summaries of external examiners' reports to be published as part of the TQI set, as outlined in *HEFCE 03/51*.

5 In 13 reports, features of good practice are cited which relate to external examining. In the particular instances these reflected strengths in the nomination, appointment, and preparation of external examiners; in the communication and liaison channels established between the institution and its external examiners; and in the use made of reports from the latter within the institutions concerned. Recommendations of an advisable nature were cited in 15 reports and recommendations for action that was considered to be desirable were mentioned in six reports.

6 Overall, institutions have generally established external examining processes and procedures reflecting the good practice to be found in the *Code of practice, Section 4, 2000* and these have, on the whole, been found to be working well. In those institutional audit reports citing features of good practice under this general heading, audit teams have been able to confirm that the processes and procedures have been effective, transparent, rigorous, meticulously implemented and monitored. Such arrangements have enabled institutions to derive maximum benefit from the contributions of their external examiners to the security of the academic standards of awards.

Features of good practice

7 Consideration of the published institutional audit reports shows the following features of good practice relating to external examining:

- the appointment, induction and advisory arrangements for external examiners (University College Chichester)

- the way in which BSUC inducts, supports and communicates with external examiners (Bath Spa University College)
 - the liaison with external examiners at University and department level (Brunel University)
 - the meticulous implementation and monitoring of the external examining process and procedures (Trinity and All Saints College)
 - the effective and transparent institutional procedures and processes for external examining (University of Buckingham)
 - the guide to assessment policies and procedures which is updated systematically and is circulated both on a university-wide basis and to external examiners (University of York)
 - the establishment of an external examiners' forum (Surrey Institute of Art and Design)
 - the approach to considering and responding to external examiners' reports at all levels of the University (University of Bath)
 - the formulation of an overview of the external examination process by faculty quality assurance team chairs (University of Bristol)
 - the categorisation of actions arising from external examiners' reports (University of Central Lancashire)
 - the detailed and analytical reports of boards of examiners, and their availability to students in following years (University of Oxford)
 - the thorough consideration of external examiner reports at institutional level (University of Keele)
 - the provision of the Academic Standards Committee Annual Report to the Academic Board and the Board of Governors (University College Chichester).
- 8 The features of good practice broadly relate to:
- the nomination and appointment of external examiners
 - their preparation and induction
 - institutional and local level communication with external examiners
 - the implementation of external examining processes and procedures
 - the use made of external examiners' reports to inform and enhance quality and standards, and
 - feedback to external examiners.

Themes

9 This part of the paper focuses on themes emerging from recommendations relating to external examiners and their reports, arising from audits undertaken in 2002-04. These can be grouped into the following broad areas:

- the roles of external examiners
- the nomination and appointment of external examiners to enable them to carry out their responsibilities

- the preparation of external examiners
- the process of external examining
- external examiners' reports
- the use made of external examiners' reports within the institution
- feedback to external examiners on their reports.

The roles of external examiners

10 The *Code of practice, Section 4, 2000* advises that 'Institutions should state clearly the various roles, powers and responsibilities assigned to their external examiners including, it adds, 'the extent of their authority in examination/assessment boards' (Precept 2). Some audit reports have highlighted inconsistencies and variability in the roles of external examiners within institutions with consequent recommendations. In some cases, the roles and responsibilities of the external examiners had not been clearly defined, resulting in differences in understanding across the institution and different areas (and sometimes programmes) using the services of external examiners in different ways, raising questions about the extent of such variations permitted by the institution.

11 In a few cases, audit reports have recommended that institutions distinguish clearly between the role of an external examiner commenting (for the benefit of the institution) on the efficacy of the assessment process, and that of a specialist advisor, able to advise, support and participate in assessment under clearly understood guidelines. In one case, it was perceived that there was a need for a clear means of documenting the involvement of external examiners in the formal approval of assessment tasks contributing to the final award, including projects and performance-related activities.

12 One audit report noted that a matter raised by external examiners, which related to a lack of criteria for how the discretion allowed for in making assessment decisions was to be used, had remained unresolved over successive years. This gave rise to a recommendation that the awarding institution which had validated the programmes should 'review, as a matter of priority, its institutional processes and their implementation to ensure that the quality and standards of its validated programmes delivered at partner colleges are appropriately safeguarded'.

13 The role of external examiners in several institutions involving 'tiered' assessment board arrangements has also given rise to recommendations. In one institution which operated a system of subject assessment boards and programme assessment boards, it was recommended that it should 'review its arrangements for securing appropriate input from external examiners to decisions relating to standards achieved by students over an entire course'. In this case, the audit report noted that changes made by the institution which had emphasised the role of the external examiner on the subject assessment board but had omitted to provide a parallel specification for their role on the programme assessment board, when coupled with reductions in the discretion allowed to programme assessment boards, had changed the relationship between the boards. This had not however addressed a perceived reluctance on the part of some

external examiners to attend two separate boards, or fully taken into account the views they had expressed about whether attendance at both boards was needed.

14 In one case it was noted that, while there was an expectation that external examiners would be consulted about substantial amendments to modules or programmes, this had not been underpinned by any formal policy. The audit report therefore recommended that it might be helpful to codify the institution's expectations for the involvement of external examiners when programmes and modules are modified.

The nomination and appointment of external examiners

15 It is clear that many institutions have effective systems in place for the nomination and appointment of external examiners. In one particular instance, the audit report noted evidence that newly-appointed external examiners received an introductory letter of 'exemplary' clarity, giving an overview of the institution and its systems. When taken together, this letter and the accompanying handbook on external examining at the institution provided a clear exposition of its policies, regulations and procedures to support the work of staff and external examiners.

16 In another case, the audit found that the institution provided a comprehensive external examiners' handbook which clearly set out its expectations and their duties and responsibilities. Newly-appointed external examiners also received a (mainly subject-based) induction and a mentorship arrangement over a year, enabling less experienced external examiners to learn from their more experienced colleagues. Newly-appointed external examiners, experienced or inexperienced, were invited to meet subject staff before undertaking their duties and were provided with their predecessors' reports.

17 The *Code of practice, Section 4, 2004* provides clearer guidance than its predecessor on nominating, appointing and ending the appointments of external examiners. In general, the audit reports have confirmed that institutions have clearly articulated criteria against which nominations of external examiners can be assessed, and that many use standard forms and checklists to facilitate consideration of individual nominations at a local level.

18 Where procedures for the nomination and approval of external examiners have been devolved within institutions, there is an expectation that the operation of such procedures should be clear to all parties and should enable the institution to exercise effective oversight of the process for appointing external examiners. In a small number of cases such institutional oversight has been found not to be fully effective. In one case this had resulted in appointments of external examiners being made 'in anticipation' of their later approval by the institution. In another case, action at a lower level had been deemed necessary in order to appoint specialist external examiners at short notice. In a further instance an audit report found that the institution lacked arrangements to oversee the nomination of external examiners to programmes offered collaboratively. The same report also noted that the (awarding) institution did not require external examiners to comment specifically on the achievements of students in its partner institutions. Some institutions maintain a record of external examiner appointments at a central level, enabling them to ensure that there is appropriate and timely external

examiner coverage. Such a record may also help to assure institutions that any additional obligations they may have, for example, as a consequence of being part of a federal arrangement, are appropriately addressed.

19 In most institutions, the process of appointing external examiners requires individual appointments to be endorsed by a senior committee, although this is not always the case. One audit found evidence of relatively informal procedures operating with regard to external examiner approval and re-approval processes. In another, where responsibility for external examiner appointments was delegated to senior staff in the faculties, the institution was advised to make the external examiner appointment process subject to more open scrutiny and more visibly the responsibility of a senior committee, to safeguard the security of the institution's awards.

20 There is evidence from some audit reports to suggest that institutions have recognised the risks inherent in drawing on external examiners from a limited pool of institutions, and have therefore sought to recruit external examiners more widely, in order to promote as broad an input of ideas and expertise as possible, and to enable the standards of the provision made to be calibrated against institutions across higher education. Where individuals who are 'practitioners' are appointed as external examiners, some institutions have perceived the need to be clear whether the former are also able to comment on the comparability of academic standards and, if so, to make appropriate arrangements, for example, in terms of additional briefing or appointing an experienced external examiner to work alongside the 'practitioner', as appropriate.

21 In the reports published to date, the period of appointment for individual external examiners has generally been stated to be three or four years, although in a small number of cases institutions provide for external examiners to be appointed annually. One report recommends the advisability of explicit arrangements to terminate the appointment of a external examiners who fail to fulfil their responsibilities. Another audit report noted evidence that the relevant institution might benefit from reviewing and modifying its monitoring processes, in order to ensure its capacity to oversee its collaborative provision effectively and to enable it to fulfil its responsibilities for the quality and standards of programmes offered through partnerships.

The preparation of external examiners to enable them to carry out their responsibilities

22 The audit reports describe a range of methods used by institutions to prepare their external examiners to take on their responsibilities. These include introductory letters and handbooks giving an overview of internal institutional policies and practices. The range of coverage of such introductions and handbooks includes the provision of briefing packs, institutional codes of practice, departmental guidelines relating to external examining, recent annual reports arising from programme monitoring and any associated action plans, and (for newly-appointed external examiners) a copy of the outgoing external examiner's last report and access to the institution's website. In some institutions such paper-based and electronic arrangements are supported by invitations for newly-appointed external examiners to attend induction events. Reports also mention the provision of mentoring schemes and shadowing opportunities to enable first-time external examiners to work with a more experienced colleague, and workshops. Some institutions convene regular

(sometimes annual) meetings of external examiners and the audit reports which describe such arrangements suggest that they can act as a helpful catalyst in improving practice - in both directions. Other communication channels established between institutions and their staff and external examiners have included an arrangement adopted by one institution of circulating information on a six-monthly basis to all external examiners with news of changes to regulations and other relevant matters, complementing the liaison activity undertaken by heads of department.

23 The locus of responsibility for ensuring that external examiners are properly inducted into their duties may vary according to the particular arrangements of an institution. In some cases, external examiners receive their induction at a local, subject level with newly-appointed external examiners being invited to meet staff within the subject area before undertaking their duties. In one case, an audit found that an institution would benefit from ensuring that the procedures used for the induction of specialist external assessors were more closely monitored, in order to ensure that they would be adequately briefed in all cases. In another audit, the absence of an external examiners' handbook appeared to have contributed to a lack of understanding of the role of external examiners, with some acting as third markers. This, coupled with a lack of clarity concerning the means of calculating the final award, and the exercise of discretion by final examination boards, led to the institution being advised to review its briefing materials to address perceived deficiencies and to provide guidance for examiners drawn from industry on the institution's expectations of external examiners and on the academic standards of awards.

24 Another audit report observed that where induction and support for external examiners was a local responsibility it was not always clear what materials schools had been providing for external examiners. On the same topic, one institution was reported to have undertaken a survey of departmental practices for the briefing and induction of external examiners, resulting in the publication of recommendations for good practice. In addition, there was evidence in some cases that external examiners were invited to comment on the appropriateness of any induction received following their appointment in their reports. One audit report noted that an induction programme for external examiners had been enhanced through the attendance of the institution's internal examiners, thus generating an effective discussion forum, and that group meetings of examiners were to be introduced, facilitating discussion of parity of standards across the institution's provision.

25 Lastly, reports have commented on how external examiners have worked with the Academic Infrastructure (AI). In one audit report it was noted that the guidance provided by the institution for its external examiners had not included information on *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) or subject benchmark statements, yet there was an expectation on the part of the institution that external examiners would comment in their reports on the relation between these elements of the AI and the programmes and awards with which they were associated. In this particular case, there was evidence that not all external examiners were familiar with the AI and some were therefore unable to comment accordingly. As a consequence, the institution concerned was advised to clarify its expectations in respect of the knowledge base of its external examiners and to provide further guidance, where appropriate. In another audit report, it was noted that few

external examiners had referred to the FHEQ in their reports. It was also noted that the relevant institution did not include a copy of the FHEQ in the information and materials sent to external examiners and that there was no indication in the handbook provided for external examiners about where they might obtain information about the FHEQ.

The process of external examining

26 The *Code of practice, Section 4, 2000* (Precept 10) and its successor the *Code of practice, Section 4, 2004* (Precept 9) both advise institutions to ensure that their external examiners have the necessary evidence available to them for the effective discharge of the responsibilities. One audit report noted that the number and proportion of external examiners in relation to modules and student numbers varied between schools, as did the way in which student work for assessment was monitored at school level. In this particular case, the range and size of samples of marked work provided for external examiners varied to such an extent that in some cases the samples provided were insufficient. The report therefore recommended the institution to consider how it might share good practice across its schools in order to assist the development of greater consistency in practice.

27 While it has been noted above that the provision of copies of institutional overview reports can assist external examiners to put their contributions to safeguarding academic standards in a wider institutional context, in a small number of cases institutional arrangements have not assisted external examiners to place their work even within the context of the programme of study to which they are attached. For example, one audit report noted that external examiners were responsible for seeing and moderating students' work in core courses, but that elective courses could contribute almost 40 per cent of the marks for the final award. Given this gap in the arrangements to ensure that its external examiners could see and moderate samples of all the material contributing to the final award, the relevant institution was advised to review the involvement of its external examiners in its assessment process for elective courses. In another audit, in the interests of evaluating the whole course experience (which, in this particular case, involved both a studio and a critical studies element) an institution was advised to consider and respond to external examiners' reports in a document covering both elements, rather than to address them separately.

28 In one audit report in which where variability in internal marking practices was identified, the combination of this with variable practice in the use of external examiners was seen to give rise to the possibility that students might not be treated equitably. In this particular case the institution was recommended to consider whether such variations in the ways in which it worked with its external examiners were acceptable.

External examiners' reports

29 In addition to their work in safeguarding academic standards, many institutions also look to the reports of their external examiners to provide them with information on the effectiveness of their quality management and assurance procedures. In order to ensure that key topics are covered in external examiners' reports and that they can be confident that the academic standards being achieved by students are appropriate to the particular award and meet more general expectations, many institutions

provide their external examiners with templates or other standard forms to complete when making their reports. Some institutions also make provision on such standard forms for external examiners to identify good practice, which can contribute to more general quality enhancement. In some institutional audit reports there is evidence to suggest that reports by external examiners have been reviewed with the purpose of encouraging the latter to provide qualitative feedback for the benefit of staff in the relevant subject area. One audit found evidence that an institution validating provision in another institution had not found the external examiner's report to be totally suited to its particular requirements, and that this had given rise to a dialogue between the partners.

30 The brevity of some external examiners' reports has been noted in a small number of audit reports which have found evidence of such reports being sent back for improvement. In one case this was because matters relating to academic standards had not been fully addressed. In the same vein, another institution was advised that it might wish to consider referring reports from external examiners back to their authors where these were too brief and provided little information that would be useful in a developmental context. Similarly, another institutional audit report observed that external examiners' reports may not always be meeting all of the particular institution's expectations.

31 The late receipt of external examiners' reports may inhibit the effective operation of institutional quality assurance systems. In this connection, one audit report observed that an institution had decided to terminate the appointments of external examiners where their reports arrived too late to be included in the annual monitoring process. In another case, an audit found evidence in one faculty that a significant number of external examiners' reports had not been received, or had been received late, some of which were outstanding at the time of the audit part way through the following year. In another, it was noted that an external examiner had failed to submit a report for two consecutive sessions before the matter had been identified and addressed, leading to a recommendation that the institution's arrangements to track the receipt of reports could benefit from clarification and enhancement.

The use made of external examiners' reports within the institution

32 The *Code of practice, Section 4, 2004* notes that, in order to derive maximum benefit from the work of their external examiners, institutions should have in place effective ways of:

- considering the reports and, where appropriate, acting upon them as soon as possible
- enabling them to know that departments/faculties/schools take account of the content of the reports and respond appropriately with responses being formally recorded
- ensuring that those responsible for a particular examination or assessment are made aware of and, if necessary,
- monitoring any changes arising from the external examining process.

33 There is clear evidence that external examiners' reports are generally considered at both institutional and local levels, and that institutions have taken steps to identify responsibilities for responding to external examiners. In one instance, an audit report noted approvingly that the institution's template for external examiners' reports now required action points to be identified as 'essential', 'advisable' and 'desirable', thus establishing the order of priority for action.

34 In addition to consideration of external examiners' reports at the subject-level, it is frequently the case that reports, and the responses made to their comments and recommendations, are summarised annually, for consideration at institutional level. Such annual institutional overview reports appear to be increasingly common: they provide a means for institutions to ensure that there is an awareness of external examiners' views of the academic standards achieved across an institution's provision, and enable institutions to identify trends and generic issues arising from external examiners' reports. At the same time, recommendations for the enhancement of quality may also feature in such institutional overview reports, which may additionally serve as a useful dissemination mechanism. There was evidence that where external examiners received copies of annual overview reports this helped them to locate their work within the wider institutional-level context. In cases where institutions had not implemented such a system of overview reports, several audit reports have indicated that consideration had been, or was being given to ensuring the most effective means of achieving an institutional overview.

35 The value of overview reports is contingent upon timely reports from, and responses to, external examiners. The value of overview reports is also dependent on them receiving sufficiently detailed scrutiny and analysis, which in turn requires that sufficient information be provided to senior committees to ensure that their members understand the context of the comments. In one audit report it was considered that a summary of external examiners' reports sent by a subordinate body to a senior committee, which took the form of a table listing points made in the reports, and indicating who was to respond to each point, conveyed little information of value. In this particular case, it was observed that the summary of the points raised in each of the external examiners' reports was so compressed that it would be unintelligible to anyone who had not read the full report. The absence in this particular arrangement of a summary description of the action proposed to meet the external examiners', together with a timescale for their completion was also remarked upon. The audit team suggested that the institution in question might like to reflect upon the practical value of these reports.

36 In general, overview reports which bring together comments from external examiners were found to provide evidence that the external examining arrangements were working well, overall, and contributing to the maintenance of the academic standards of awards. The merits of institutional-wide overviews may not always be recognised at a local level, however. One audit, for example, found a lack of clarity about where central oversight of external examiners' reports resided, and how issues were tracked at institutional level, resulting in a recommendation that the institution should adopt 'a more robustly documented approach to the management of external examiners' reports and the issues raised within them that relate directly to both the monitoring and maintenance of standards, as well as the explicit expression of these

standards at the institutional level'. In another case, where digests of external examiners' reports were prepared by officers for consideration by faculty boards, it was suggested that these should also be routinely and formally considered at an institutional level by the relevant senior committee.

37 External examiners' reports generally feed in to annual monitoring processes. In one institution, however, where the audit report found that annual monitoring reports were intended to communicate recommendations by external examiners to senior committees responsible for quality, but that this was not happening, the audit team considered that this failure had compromised the external examining process. Additionally, the potential for selectively reporting comments by external examiners had enabled slow responses to their reports to go undetected. In another - extreme - case this had allowed a recurring matter of concern to lie dormant for some time. In this instance, the institution was advised of the need to review the implementation of its quality assurance processes to ensure appropriate institutional oversight of responses to external examiners and to enable it to gain full benefit from their efforts to monitor and secure academic standards.

38 In another case where the periodic review of modules often did not include formal consideration of external examiners' comments, the audit report noted that 'the opportunity to set those comments alongside the views of students and staff was frequently lost'. In the same vein, but elsewhere, other audit reports have suggested that the inclusion of external examiners' reports in internal subject and curriculum review processes 'would offer a helpful opportunity for [the] further enhancement [of the latter]'. In the same report, the audit team noted that it was not usual practice in the relevant institution to circulate copies of external examiners' reports, in full, to faculty members, but that relevant reports were made available to faculty who wished to consult them. However, subject leaders in this particular institution were members of the examinations committee and, while there was no formal requirement or expectation that they would report back to other members of their subject area, this appeared to take place routinely and subject areas discussed reports by external examiners and particular comments. In this case the institution was advised 'to consider making reports from external examiners more easily accessible to [teaching and other] staff.'

39 Some institutions make use of their external examiners services when approving new provision or undertaking periodic reviews. Such arrangements will be discussed in a later paper in the *Outcomes...* series (see Appendix 3, page 18).

Feedback to external examiners on their reports

40 The *Code of practice, Section 4, 2000* highlights the importance attached to the formal response from an institution to its external examiners within the feedback process, reflecting the fundamental nature of external examiners' contributions to the process by means of which institutions assure the academic standards of their awards. Institutions need to ensure that their arrangements for managing external examiners' reports provide them with sufficient and consistent information at an institutional level, and are sufficiently robust to enable them to exercise effective oversight of external examiners' reports and responses to them in discharging their institutional responsibilities as awarding bodies (or to an awarding body).

41 Timely and informed feedback on action taken in response to reports submitted by external examiners provides the latter with grounds for confidence that proper account is taken of their comments or recommendations, whether these are subject-specific or relevant institution-wide. Evidence from the audit reports suggests that institutions are continuing to refine their arrangements to provide feedback to their external examiners in the light of the advice of *The Code of practice, Section 4, 2000*. However, in a small number of cases the evidence suggested that comments and suggestions by external examiners had not always been addressed promptly and effectively.

42 In a small number of cases, audit reports found that some external examiners did not routinely receive formal, written feedback on responses to their reports or on actions taken to address any issues raised, although generally there was evidence to indicate that external examiners' comments were being addressed. As a result, recommendations have focused on the need to enhance internal arrangements for providing feedback to external examiners on actions taken in response to their reports.

43 Several audit reports have identified scope for the relevant institutions to achieve greater consistency in the quality of responses made to external examiners' reports and in the timeliness and thoroughness of those responses. In such cases, the provision of standard forms and templates to support external examiners when compiling their reports has been recommended (see above, paragraphs 17 and 29). Again in such cases, it was suggested that standard forms helped to clarify the institution's expectations and promote a greater measure of consistency in the process.

44 Some audit reports have indicated that where complex procedures have been adopted for responding to external examiners' reports, involving staff at several levels within the institution, there can be potential for confusion about where responsibility rests for responding to particular matters, and about who has responsibility for ensuring that action has been taken. One audit report recommended that an institution should review its procedures for disseminating feedback from external examiners and assessors to ensure issues arising are suitably addressed, loops closed, and outcomes assured. Another institution was advised to ensure, and confirm, that commitments given on its behalf by schools to external examiners (or to itself by schools) were met in a timely fashion. Evidence from another audit, where the institution might provide feedback to its external examiners from a variety of sources, suggested that tracking individual responses was complicated and difficult. In that particular case, 'action planning' was about to be introduced into annual subject reports which was expected to make tracking simpler.

Conclusions

45 Together, the 70 institutional audit reports published in 2003-04 provide information which points to external examiner arrangements which are generally working well and effectively overall. The reports also show that institutions are making constructive use of the *Code of practice, Section 4, 2000* and other elements of the AI in developing and refining their external examining arrangements.

46 Evidence from the audits undertaken suggest that institutions and discipline areas are engaging productively with their external examiners in maintaining the academic standards of awards and in assisting with the enhancement of the quality of provision.

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
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



Appendix 1

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

Projected titles of *Outcomes...* papers

In most cases, *Outcomes...* papers will be no longer than 15 sides of A4. QAA retains copyright in the *Outcomes...* papers, but as noted earlier, they may be freely used, with acknowledgement.

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

Title	To be published (dates are provisional)
Overview	April 2005
The Academic Infrastructure - programme specifications	April 2005
External examiners and their reports	April 2005
The Academic Infrastructure - The framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ)	April 2005
Academic guidance, support and supervision	May 2005
Student representation and feedback arrangements	May 2005
Staff support and development	May 2005
Validation and approval, annual monitoring, and periodic review	June 2005
Assessment and classification arrangements	June 2005
The Academic Infrastructure - subject benchmark statements	July 2005
Institutions' intentions for quality enhancement	July 2005
Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports	August 2005
Progression and completion statistics and their use in quality and academic standards management	September 2005
Virtual learning environments (VLEs)	September 2005

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* 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 documents published on QAA's 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 written by assistant directors with experience of institutional audit. 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.

Note on discipline audit trails (DATs)

There are 75 references in individual paragraphs to features of good practice in the DATs and, similarly, recommendations linked to 125 paragraphs. Features of good practice and recommendations in the DATs will be subject to further coding and analysis in summer 2005.

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