Outcomes from institutional audit
Progression and completion statistics

Summary

Consideration of the institutional audit reports published by November 2004 shows that most institutions were aware of the need to have access to reliable and timely progression and completion data, and management information more generally. Most had begun to engage with the developments required to make this possible. Also, most institutions were making good progress towards meeting the requirements of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for the provision of Teaching Quality Information (TQI).

The institutional audit reports also show that the degree to which progression and completion data is gathered, analysed and used to inform policy and strategy varies from institution to institution. Definitions for the key terms 'progression' and 'completion' can also vary from institution to institution; in some cases, institutions have yet to arrive at consistent definitions of these terms for their own internal use.

The institutional audit reports show that achieving the acquisition of comprehensive progression and completion data requires institutions to pay close attention to their data collection arrangements, and to ensure that they cover all their provision, including that delivered through partnership links. A number of institutions have successfully introduced such comprehensive arrangements for collecting progression and completion data for taught students, but there are fewer examples of the extension of such arrangements to research students.

Comments in the published audit reports suggest that the development of fully integrated management information systems is an emerging feature in the quality and academic standards management arrangements of many institutions. Overall, moves to widen access to higher education and improve the retention of students have been a key consideration for many institutions when deciding to introduce such management information systems.

Most arrangements for collecting data described in the institutional audit reports depend on central arrangements. The institution requires its departments, schools and faculties to supply data to a central unit, through which data and analysis is subsequently provided to departments etc, to support monitoring, review and assessment processes. In several cases, audit reports stated that institutions had facilitated the use of such centrally provided data through user-friendly software tools which enabled data to be used consistently.

Several reports commented that where teaching or locally based administrative staff were unsure of the accuracy of centrally provided data, or where such centrally provided data was not provided in a timely manner, departments could develop their own databases and that this could lead to overlapping data sets. Several reports found that this risk had been managed by arranging for departmental users of data to work closely with those providing data from the centre.

Overall, the audit reports show that institutions' use of progression and completion data, and other sources of data to manage the quality of their provision and the academic standards of their awards, appears to be growing rapidly. This is a developing area in institutional practice.

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 and their location in the Main report. Although all features of good practice are listed, in the interests of brevity not all are discussed in this paper. In the initial listing in paragraph 10, the first reference is to the numbered or bulleted lists of features of good practice at the end of each institutional audit report, the second to the relevant paragraphs in Section 2 of the Main report. Throughout the body of this paper, references to features of good practice in the institutional audit reports give the institution's name and the paragraph number from Section 2 of the Main report.

It should be emphasised that the features of good practice mentioned in this paper should be considered in their proper institutional context and that each is perhaps best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as a model for emulation. A note on the topics identified for the first series of *Outcomes...* papers, to be published throughout 2005-06, can be found at Appendix 3 (page 13).

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. 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.

Progression and completion statistics: introduction and general overview

1   This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the first 70 institutional audits published by 5 November 2004 (see Appendix 1, page 10). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in the *Outcomes…* series can be found in Appendix 4 (page 14).

2   In 2001 under an agreement between HEFCE, Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals and QAA, universal QAA subject review ceased. This change was approved by Government and it was to be replaced by a series of transitional arrangements, including institutional audit. As part of these arrangements, it was agreed that higher education institutions would provide up-to-date information on their provision, and their quality and academic standards arrangements for students, employers and the public, in place of the information formerly provided by QAA subject reviews on subject level provision. The characteristics of the data to be made available under this agreement were the subject of consultations in 2002-03. A specification for what is now referred to collectively as TQI was published in HEFCE 2003/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education* (October 2003).

3   Since 2002, all institutional audit reports should describe how institutions use statistical information in evaluating quality and safeguarding the academic standards of their awards, including the nature of the information used and how it is linked into institutional policies and processes, such as those for the admission of students. Audit reports are also required to comment on the readiness of institutions to provide the data required as part of the TQI initiative.

4   Consideration of the institutional audit reports published by November 2004 makes it clear that the terms 'progression and completion statistics' have been interpreted broadly by institutions and therefore in the reports themselves. In addition to what would be conventionally understood as progression and completion data, the following sets of data are mentioned in reports:

●   applications and admissions data

●   student performance on individual modules

●   cohort performance

●   data relating to widening participation and access

●   first destination data.

5   With the exception of those higher education institutions with mainly postgraduate provision, in most cases the discussion of progression and completion statistics is confined to undergraduate programmes. From the reports published by November 2004 it is also clear that interpretations of the terms 'progression' and 'completion' can (and do) vary from institution to institution. In a number of cases discussed in the reports, problems experienced in gathering, disseminating and using of such data effectively have sometimes related to differing interpretations of these terms within individual institutions (see below, paragraph 13).

6   The extent to which progression and completion data is gathered, analysed and used to inform policy and strategy varies from institution to institution. While a number of audit reports identified features of good practice in the way institutions were approaching the use of progression and completion statistics, and data more generally, more than 20 reports included recommendations relating to the use of data and statistics, suggesting that there is scope for future development in this area. It is also clear that most of the institutions which had hosted an institutional audit by autumn 2004 seem to have expected the monitoring and review of academic provision to be informed by the use of statistical information.

7   The fundamental source of information for an institutional audit is the self-evaluation document (SED), which is prepared by the institution. To support institutions preparing for audits, QAA's *Handbook for institutional audit: England* provides an indicative structure for self-evaluation documents and also refers institutions to the recommendations of HEFCE 02/15, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final report of the Task Group* (March 2002), which states that all institutions will have available internally progression, retention and completion data. Several audit reports drew attention to the fact that the SEDs for the relevant institutions had been silent on progression retention and completion data. In some cases, such omissions might be accounted for by the fact that several institutions were in a transitional or developmental position with regard to the provision and analysis of data (see below, paragraphs 23 and 29).

8   Institutional audit also uses the various elements of the Academic Infrastructure as a point of reference. For example, QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), *Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review* refers to the use of 'student progress information' and to 'the achievements of student cohorts' in monitoring the well-being of academic provision [Precept 8]. In this particular instance, audit reports provide little evidence of explicit linkage between the *Code of practice* and institutional practice.

9   The use of progression and completion data in programme monitoring is touched on in three other papers published in the *Outcomes…* series: *Validation and approval of new provision, and its periodic review; Assessment of students;* and *Programme monitoring arrangements.*

Features of good practice

10   Consideration of the published institutional audit reports shows the following features of good practice relating to progression and completion statistics:

- the opportunities afforded to the University in the analysis and presentation of student data provided by the recently developed Progression Analysis Tool, evidenced by its utility, perceived reliability and sophistication [University of Kent, paragraphs 237 and 88-90]

- the Report of the 'Project on Indicators of Academic Performance' [University of Cambridge, paragraphs 202 i, 62 and 165]

- the use of progression and completion statistics in annual monitoring [Royal College of Music, paragraphs 183 iii and 87]

- the School's practice for identification and support of students 'at risk' [School of Pharmacy, University of London, paragraphs 159 iii, 80 and 97-98]
- the School's identification of, and responses to, difficulties in retaining students, including its use of diagnostic assessments [School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, paragraphs 299 i, 89 and 184]
- the measures taken to improve retention [University of Wolverhampton, paragraphs 295, 108, 144 and 153]
- the utilisation, consideration and analysis of management information data, particularly in the areas of admissions, student records and assessment [St Martin's College, Lancaster, paragraphs 217 viii, 93 and 138].

Themes

11   This section of the paper discusses the broad themes which emerge from both recommendations and features of good practice in relation to retention and progression statistics. These include:

- definition and sharing of data
- reporting of progression and completion for research degree students
- central provision of and access to data
- analysis and use of data to inform action
- external requirements for data provision.

Definition and sharing of data

12   In most cases, audit reports indicate that institutions gather statistical information on student performance and outcomes to inform the monitoring and action planning process. Only one report commented on the virtual absence of the use of statistical data in annual monitoring processes, with no institutional-level use of progression, retention or completion rates. Several audit reports suggest, however, that the relevant institutions might not have achieved clear and consistent definitions of key concepts such as 'progression', 'completion' and 'failure' for use institution-wide, with the implication that this might have hampered cross-institution sharing and analysis of data.

13   Some audit reports found that gaps in cross-institutional coverage in the collection, analysis and use of data arising from other circumstances could also give rise to difficulties. For example, where institutions have embraced modular arrangements, the concepts of 'progression' and 'completion' may be less straightforward than in contexts where students follow programmes of study leading to more traditional single honours awards. There are other circumstances in which there may be gaps in the collection and analysis of data: for example, data may be available for the greater part of an institution's modular provision, but may not be available for provision which lies outside the frameworks or schemes supporting the modularised provision.

14   Gaps in cross-institutional collection analysis and use of data can also occur when the awarding institution in a partnership arrangement has not specified how data is to be collected by its partners, and how they are to provide that data to it. In one case,

an audit report noted that arrangements for providing progression and completion data varied not only between partners of the same awarding institution, but between programmes of that institution, which was recommended 'to provide [senior committees] with statistical analyses of student progression and completion across the full range of [its] provision, including that which is offered in partnership with other organisations'.

Reporting of progression and completion for research degree students

15   Consideration of the first 70 institutional audit reports suggests that in most institutions, formal management information systems for tracking progression and completion are largely restricted to taught degrees and, in some cases, to undergraduate taught provision only. The evidence of the reports suggest that even where progression data on research students is routinely gathered this tends to be done on an individual basis, via reports from supervisors or supervisory teams. In such cases, it appears that there may be little or no pooling of data or cohort analysis and that such data as exists may not be used to inform policy.

Central provision of access to data

16   Data is usually gathered centrally by institutions, for dissemination to faculties, schools and departments. Only one report describes circumstances where the provision of data to the centre was the responsibility of departmental level staff.

17   Several audit reports comment positively on arrangements to provide staff across the institution with access to data from a single central source, to ensure that all staff use the same source of data. More than one report suggests that achieving the confidence of faculty-level and department-level staff in the accuracy, timeliness and reliability of data provided by the centre is paramount. One report found that a key to meeting this need was to ensure a high level of interaction between central and departmental staff. In this case, the University had come to regard its previous system as 'too complex' and the report commented approvingly on its readiness to address this perception. In turn this had given rise to development of a tool for sharing data about which staff in departments were reported to be 'enthusiastic' [University of Kent, paragraphs 88-89]. A number of other audit reports also comment positively on the benefits of developing suitable management information tools to enable staff at a local level to extract and analyse centrally collected and stored data to meet local needs.

18   The importance of providing department and faculty based users with access to authoritative and accurate data is emphasised in those audit reports where this was found not to be the case. For example, in one report departmental staff perceived centrally provided data to be inaccurate and not always to be available when needed, while in another report similar experiences had led to the development of locally produced and managed databases. This was in addition to (and in some cases in preference to) those provided centrally. The same phenomenon was described in another audit report, where it was noted that lack of confidence in centrally provided data had the tendency to give rise to 'duplicate sets of non-matching data'. The audit report suggested that the existence of such duplicate sets of data could lead to discrepancies in the reporting of progression and completion statistics.

19   The provision of suitable user-friendly tools, to enable staff at department or faculty level to extract data in a consistent manner, also appears to be an important factor in their readiness to use centrally provided data. Several audit reports describe how institutions are developing such tools, usually via centrally based information services.

Analysis and use of data to inform action

20   A number of the audit reports describe circumstances in which data was available in the relevant institutions in abundance, but was not being fully exploited. Reasons given for this lack of use varied. In one case, the institution itself had found that at the centre data was 'hard to come by'. In another, exploitation of data was being inhibited by the difficulties staff experienced when seeking to access data generated and held by the centre. Where staff at department or faculty level lack confidence in the quality of the data provided for them by the centre they may doubt the value of its analysis.

21   Several audit reports describe the absence of a requirement from the centre of the institution for the collection of data on a routine basis as the reason for limitations in the institution's exploitation of data. In one case, however, the College had made it a requirement that staff carry out analysis of data as part of the annual monitoring process [Royal College of Music, 87], while in another the conduct of cross-institutional analysis of data was identified as a feature of good practice [St Martin's College, Lancaster, 93].

22   The imperatives of widening participation and improving student retention have been important factors when the decision has been taken, at institution level, to introduce the analysis of undergraduate retention data. There are a number of features of good practice related to this area. For example, one institution had engaged in a major study of those factors related to final degree classification [University of Cambridge, 62]. Others had used progression data to inform strategies to improve retention rates and help identify students 'at risk' [University of Wolverhampton, 108; School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 89; School of Pharmacy, University of London 80, 97-98].

23   In several cases, audit reports have found good practice in the adoption of a fully integrated institutional approach to the provision and use of all types of management information relating to student performance [St Martin's College, Lancaster, 91-92; University of Kent, 88]. The low number of such instances, when coupled with the more numerous cases in which institutions have embarked on their development, suggests that the achievement of fully integrated management information systems is an emerging feature in the quality and academic standards management arrangements of many institutions.

24   A number of the recommendations relating to the use of progression and completion data, have the following characteristics:

- the presentation of data may be purely descriptive
- quantitative data where available may be analysed in isolation, rather than being used as one strand of evidence in an evaluative reporting process

- practice may be inconsistent between different departments or reporting units, with the result that it is difficult to pool data for cross-institutional analysis
- there may be no comparative aspect to the analysis
- there may be no direct link between data analysis and local or institutional action.

External requirements for data provision

25   As noted in paragraph 2 above, the arrangements under which universal subject review ceased required higher education institutions to provide statistical information on a regular basis, some of which is directly accessible to the public. These requirements include those related to the TQI initiative and, for research degrees, the reporting requirements of the Research Councils.

26   Audit reports have commented on a few instances where inadequacies in the statistical information being gathered by the relevant institutions might render them unable to meet the requirements of TQI, as set out in HEFCE 02/15. In one case, however, an audit report suggested that limitations in the way in which the progression of research students was reported might mean that the relevant institution might find it difficult to meet the Joint Funding Councils' Threshold Standards for research degree programmes.

Evidence from elsewhere in the audit reports

27   While the preceding remarks have been based mainly on a consideration of those parts of the reports which address progression and completion statistics most directly, there are numerous mentions of the provision and use of quantitative data in other parts of the reports. Some points of interest arising from other sections of the reports are summarised in this section.

Statistics in annual monitoring and review

28   Most institutional processes for reporting on the monitoring of programmes include a requirement for the provision of statistical data. These usually relate to aspects such as progression, individual module/unit performances, admissions and awards. Many institutions use a centrally provided template to give effect to this. In some cases, the audit reports make it clear that institutions require an analytical discussion of such data as part of the reporting process. In one case, however, a report characterised the use made of the data in the relevant institution's monitoring reports as 'cursory'.

Institutions' intentions for enhancement in this area

29   Only three institutions out of the first 70 audited included improvements in management information systems in their strategies for enhancement. However, from the number of instances where institutions' arrangements in this area are described as 'developing', or where systems are stated to be 'in the process of introduction', it would appear that there is a great deal of work in progress.

Use of statistical data at subject level as seen in the discipline audit trails (DATs)

30   DATs provided much of the confirmatory evidence to support both features of good practice and recommendations in the use of statistical data at subject level. Those parts of the Main reports which describe the enquiries undertaken in the DATs make it clear that much careful and detailed analysis of statistical data is being carried out at the module/unit and course level. A review of the first 70 audit reports shows, however, that practice varied across the institutions - particularly in the extent to which the results of such analysis were being used to inform effective local action.

Conclusions

31   A review of the institutional audit reports published by November 2004 shows a few instances where institutions had yet to take the full measure of what was required of them in the collection analysis and presentation of data, following the changes to external quality assurance introduced in 2001-02. In most cases, however, institutions were aware that their academic administration, and their strategic planning and policy development processes, required them to be able to access reliable and timely progression and completion data, and management information more generally. The audit reports also show that most institutions had begun to engage with the necessary developments in this area.

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

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	Publishing date (provisional)
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	November 2005
Programme monitoring arrangements	January 2006
Assessment of students	January 2006
Learning support resources (including VLEs)	January 2006
Validation, approval 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
Academic advice, guidance and supervision	April 2006
Specialist institutions and institutional audit	May 2006
Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and standards	May 2006
Subject benchmark statements	tbc
The framework for higher education qualifications	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* 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 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.