



QAA

Outcomes from institutional audit Specialist institutions



© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2006

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Printed copies of current publications are available from:

Linney Direct

Adamsway

Mansfield

NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450629

Email qaa@linneydirect.com

Registered charity number 1062746.

Summary

This paper identifies 'specialist institutions' with reference to their missions. On this basis, of the 70 institutional audit reports published by November 2004, 24 relate to such specialist institutions. Consideration of these reports shows that, in general, they are satisfactorily managing academic standards and the quality of the provision they make available to students.

Features of good practice were observed in all 24 reports. They included strengths in the systems for assuring standards and quality; in the processes for approving, monitoring and reviewing the educational provision; in the use of external reference points such as the Academic Infrastructure developed by QAA on behalf of the higher education sector in the UK; in the representation of students' views and the use of feedback from students, graduates and employers; in arrangements to assure the quality of teaching staff; in the use of resources to support learning; and in the provision of academic guidance and personal support.

Good practice was most clearly to be seen in the ways the institutions provide academic guidance and personal support to their students. To some extent the small size of many of the specialist institutions and the friendly atmosphere they were able to cultivate helped to sustain a high level of support for students, but it was apparent also that the growing diversity of the student population was providing challenges that, in several of these institutions, were being met successfully.

There was also good practice in the development of frameworks for managing the academic quality and standards of the programmes available to students and in several institutions such developments had been informed by reference to the Academic Infrastructure. The processes used by the institutions for assuring standards and quality had also benefited from the guidance provided by the Academic Infrastructure.

A number of the specialist institutions provide educational opportunities in the creative and performance arts, and for these institutions finding appropriate ways of assessing students' work can present a challenge. However, there were examples of innovative assessment methods which had been used with success and which were described in reports as examples of good practice.

In general, arrangements for ensuring that students' views are represented at all levels, and that students' evaluations are taken into account in the steps taken to enhance learning and teaching, were working satisfactorily. For the smaller institutions, informal as well as formal methods were effective and had benefited students.

Recommendations in the audit reports for the specialist institutions covered a wide range of topics but clustered in the systems for assuring standards and quality; the processes for approving, monitoring and reviewing the provision; the management of external examiners and their reports; the use of external reference points; the representation of students' views and the use of feedback from students, graduates and employers; and the assurance of the quality of teaching staff. In such cases it is worth noting that the institutions' responses annexed to the reports generally showed that the necessary steps were being taken to effect improvements.

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 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 4, 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 Sections 2 and 3 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 those Sections 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, can be found at Appendix 3 (page 22).

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.

Specialist institutions in institutional audit: 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. A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in the *Outcomes...* series can be found in Appendix 4 (page 23).

2 The 24 specialist institutions whose audit reports are considered in this paper are listed in Appendix 2 (page 21). They include eight which are constituents of the University of London, 12 specialising in the creative arts, including four music conservatoires, and three specialising in agricultural and veterinary studies. At the time of their respective institutional audits, in addition to the eight institutions which were able to award degrees of the University of London, five were able to make their own degree awards and the remaining 11 offered taught and research programmes in association with another institution with its own awarding powers. Most of these institutions are relatively small, with less than 1,000 students. In some the provision is exclusively at a postgraduate level, whereas in others there are few postgraduate students.

3 Other papers in the *Outcomes...* series have drawn attention to the features of good practice linked to these audit reports and have made reference to the recommendations which appear in them. This paper has been produced in response to requests from a number of specialist institutions for feedback that relates more closely to their experiences and circumstances. Consideration of the 24 published audit reports for the specialist institutions shows that the features of good practice and recommendations identified in the reports are sufficiently distinctive to justify a paper focused on these reports. Some of the common themes are likely to be of particular relevance to these institutions and the work they do to enhance students' experience.

Features of good practice

4 All the audit reports for specialist institutions cite features of good practice and these concern almost the full range of topics covered in audit reports. In view of the number of features of good practice and in the interests of brevity the references to the features are included in the summary listing below.

The institution's view as expressed in its self-evaluation document

- Trinity and All Saints College [paragraphs 147 i, 23-24]

Framework for managing quality and standards

- Institute of Education, University of London [paragraphs 159 ii, 23]
- London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [paragraphs 134 i, 23]
- Royal College of Art [paragraphs 156 i, 32]
- Newman College of Higher Education [paragraphs 210 i, 39]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 ii, 29-30]
- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 i, 32]

Outcomes from institutional audit

- Trinity College of Music [paragraphs 153 i, 30]
- Royal College of Nursing Institute [paragraphs 158 ii, 29]
- Writtle College [paragraphs 182 i, 22]
- The London Institute [paragraphs 242 i, 37, 242 ii, 41]
- Wimbledon School of Art [paragraphs 239 i, 28, 31]

Intentions for enhancement of quality and standards

- The Royal Veterinary College [paragraphs 25 i, 65, 25 ii, 66]
- Institute of Education, University of London [paragraphs 159 i, 16]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 i, 25]
- The London Institute [paragraphs 242 i, 54]

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

- Royal College of Art [paragraphs 156 i, 38]
- Newman College of Higher Education [paragraphs 210 ii, 65]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 iii, 42]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 iii, 29-31]
- Trinity College of Music [paragraphs 153 ii, 37, 39, 45]
- Royal College of Nursing Institute [paragraphs 158 iii, 45-47]

External participation in internal review processes

- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 ii, 63]
- Royal Agricultural College [paragraphs 176 i, 56]

External examiners and their reports

- Royal Academy of Music [paragraphs 143 i, 52]
- Trinity and All Saints College [paragraphs 147 ii, 41]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 iv, 37]

External reference points

- Royal College of Art [paragraphs 156 ii, 54]
- Royal College of Music [paragraphs 183 i, 77]
- The School of Pharmacy, University of London [paragraphs 159 i, 62]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 v, 40]
- Trinity and All Saints College [paragraphs 147 iii, 45]
- Royal Agricultural College [paragraphs 176 iv, 65]
- Writtle College [paragraphs 182 ii, 59]
- Wimbledon School of Art [paragraphs 239 i, 77, 79-82, 85-86]

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 ii, 73]

Student representation at operational and institutional levels

- Wimbledon School of Art [paragraphs 239 ii, 95]
- Royal Academy of Music [paragraphs 143 ii, 61]
- London Business School [paragraphs 204 i, 82]
- Newman College of Higher Education [paragraphs 210 iii, 83]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 iv, 59]
- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 i, 75]
- Royal Agricultural College [paragraphs 176 ii, 71]

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

- London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [paragraphs 134 ii, 55]
- London Business School [paragraphs 204 ii, 89, 204 iii, 91, 204 iv, 94]
- Newman College of Higher Education of Higher Education [paragraphs 204 iii, 95]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 iv, 60]
- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 i, 76, 150 ii, 79]
- Royal College of Music [paragraphs 183 ii, 83]
- The School of Pharmacy, University of London [paragraphs 159 ii, 74-75, 77]
- Trinity College of Music [paragraphs 153 iii, 68]
- Trinity and All Saints College [paragraphs 147 iv, 52, 147 v, 53]
- Royal Agricultural College [paragraphs 176 iv, 77]
- Wimbledon School of Art [paragraphs 239 iii, 101]

Progression and completion statistics

- School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London [paragraphs 299 i, 89]
- Royal College of Music [paragraphs 183 iii, 87]
- The School of Pharmacy, University of London [paragraphs 159 iii, 80]
- The Institute of Cancer Research [paragraphs 142 i, 68, 142 ii, 82]

Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward

- London Business School [paragraphs 204 v, 105]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 v, 67, 154 vi, 69]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 i, 51-53]
- Wimbledon School of Art [paragraphs 239 i, 107-108]
- Royal Agricultural College [paragraphs 176 i, 86, 176 iii, 87-88]

Outcomes from institutional audit

- Writtle College [paragraphs 182 iii, 81]
- The London Institute [paragraphs 242 iii, 109-110]

Assurance of the quality of teaching staff through support and development

- The Royal Veterinary College [paragraphs 25 i, 106-108]
- Cumbria Institute of the Arts [paragraphs 179 i, 92]
- Royal Academy of Music [paragraphs 143 i, 74]
- Royal College of Art [paragraphs 156 iii, 78]
- School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London [paragraphs 299 ii, 98, 299 iii, 101]
- London Business School [paragraphs 204 vi, 110]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 vii, 74]
- Royal Northern College of Music [paragraphs 120 i, 64]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 i, 54-56]
- Trinity and All Saints College [paragraphs 147 vi, 66]
- Royal College of Nursing Institute [paragraphs 158 iv, 84-88]
- The London Institute [paragraphs 242 iii, 114]
- Wimbledon School of Art [paragraphs 239 iii, 116, 239 iv, 118]

Learning support resources

- The Royal Veterinary College [paragraphs 25 ii, 112, 139]
- Cumbria Institute of the Arts [paragraphs 179 ii, 99]
- Royal Academy of Music [paragraphs 143 iii, 77, 143 iv, 83]
- School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London [paragraphs 299 iv, 122]
- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 iii, 99]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 ii, 59]
- Trinity College of Music [paragraphs 153 iv, 88, 90-91]
- Royal College of Nursing Institute [paragraphs 158 i, 95]
- Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication [paragraphs 210 ii, 127]
- Royal Agricultural College [paragraphs 176 iv, 94]
- Institute of Cancer Research [paragraphs 142 iii, 104]

Academic guidance, support and supervision

- Institute of Education, University of London [paragraphs 159 iii, 72-73, 159 vi, 119]
- London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [paragraphs 134 i, 85, 87]
- Royal Academy of Music [paragraphs 143 iv, 87]
- Royal College of Art [paragraphs 156 ii, 88]

- School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London [paragraphs 299 iv, 125]
- London Business School [paragraphs 204 vii, 122]
- Newman College of Higher Education [paragraphs 210 iv, 130, 210 v, 131]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 viii, 83]
- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 iii, 102]
- The School of Pharmacy, University of London [paragraphs 159 iii, 97-98, 159 v, 99]
- Trinity College of Music [paragraphs 153 iii, 95-97]
- Trinity and All Saints College [paragraphs 147 vii, 74]
- Royal College of Nursing Institute [paragraphs 158 ii, 98, 100-102, 158 iv, 96-103]
- Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication [paragraphs 210 i, 134]
- Royal Agricultural College [paragraphs 176 i, 10]
- Writtle College [paragraphs 182 iv, 101-109]
- The London Institute [paragraphs 242 iv, 134-138]
- Wimbledon School of Art [paragraphs 239 ii, 138-139, 239 iv, 143-145]

Personal support and guidance

- Cumbria Institute of the Arts [paragraphs 179 iii, 113]
- Royal Academy of Music [paragraphs 143 i, 97, 143 iii, 99]
- Newman College of Higher Education [paragraphs 210 v, 136]
- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 iv, 109]
- Royal College of Music [paragraphs 183 iv, 113]
- Royal Northern College of Music [paragraphs 120 ii, 79, 120 iii, 80, 120 iv, 80, 120 v, 81]
- The School of Pharmacy, University of London [paragraphs 159 iv, 106, 159 vi, 106]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 vi, 66, 147 vii, 65-66]
- Trinity College of Music [paragraphs 153 iv, 102]
- Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication [paragraphs 210 ii, 136, 143]
- Writtle College [paragraphs 182 iv, 110-117]

Collaborative provision

- Royal College of Art [paragraphs 156 v, 96]
- Norwich School of Art and Design [paragraphs 154 i, 12]

Discipline audit trails

- The Royal Veterinary College [paragraphs 25 iii, 131]
- Institute of Education, University of London [paragraphs 159 v, 87, 159 vi, 96]
- London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [paragraphs 134 iii, 101]

Outcomes from institutional audit

- School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London [paragraphs 299 i, 184, 299 v, 178, vi, 218]
- Rose Bruford College [paragraphs 150 i, 119]
- The School of Pharmacy, University of London [paragraphs 159 ii, 124, 159 vi, 125]
- The Surrey Institute of Art & Design, University College [paragraphs 147 iii, 80 147 v, 94, 147 vii, 96, 147 viii, 89]
- Trinity College of Music [paragraphs 153 i, 116]
- Royal College of Nursing Institute [paragraphs 158 i, 114]
- Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication [paragraphs 210 i, 156, 159]

The students' experience of published information and other information available to them

- London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [paragraphs 134 iii, 104]
- Writtle College [paragraphs 182 v, 139-142]
- Institute of Cancer Research [paragraphs 142 iii, 124]

Themes

5 This paper considers themes emerging from the noted features of good practice and the recommendations relating to:

- the management of quality and standards
- use of the Academic Infrastructure
- the approval, monitoring and review processes
- assessment and external examining
- student representation and feedback arrangements
- staff support and development arrangements
- academic guidance and personal support.

Readers should note that each of the above topics have also been the focus of separate, though linked, *Outcomes...* papers available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalaudit/outcomes/

The management of quality and standards

6 All the specialist institutions considered in this paper have developed frameworks for managing academic quality and standards. In some cases there had been recent improvements which were judged effective. For example, one institution had introduced a revised framework which 'had addressed many of the limitations regarding lack of clarity about responsibility for decision making of the previous...structure', and was able to produce evidence of 'effective leadership, management and commitment' within the new framework [Institute of Education, University of London, 23]. In another institution, a forum had been established which successfully identified and disseminated good practice across the constituent colleges [The London Institute, 37 and 41].

7 Where appropriate, these frameworks incorporated provision undertaken in collaborations with partner institutions and some reports noted good practice in this respect [Royal College of Art, 32; Writtle College, 22; Newman College of Higher Education, 39]. One report observed that the framework used had enabled wide consultation with staff and students as part of the process leading to engagement with a new partner institution [Newman College of Higher Education, 210 and 39]. In another report it was noted that the approach to collaborative arrangements had led to practical benefits to students particularly in clarifying assessment practice [Royal College of Art, 38].

8 Good practice was also found in the management of provision for research students [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 23; Royal College of Nursing Institute, 29]. In one institution a recent review had resulted in greater consistency in practice, and in the development of an 'exemplary' handbook for research students outlining 'a robust set of procedures for staff and students which the audit team considered to be highly supportive of research students' [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 23]. In another institution, the audit report noted the strength of the monitoring of research students' progress undertaken by the committee overseeing this aspect of provision [Royal College of Nursing Institute, 29].

9 Several of the recommendations of the audit reports for specialist institutions called for the adoption of a more prominent strategic perspective in frameworks for managing quality and standards. In one institution, for example, where progress in developing quality assurance systems had been slow and incomplete, the audit report advised the institution, as 'a matter of priority', to 'develop its capacity to maintain a formal institutional strategic overview of, and responsibility for, quality and standards'. In another, the report discerned a need for leadership in developing institutional initiatives and advised the institution 'to consider identifying a means to champion, at a strategic level, both quality management and the management of academic standards across the [institution]'. A further example is provided by a report in which the institution was 'strongly encouraged to consider...the strategic dimension of committee deliberation, and the ways in which information and data are used to give an institutional perspective on [its] ability to manage quality and standards'.

10 Some reports indicated that a strategic approach to the management of quality and standards would assist in the development of greater formality, clarity and consistency in the processes used to assure quality and standards. In one report, for example, the institution was advised to formalise and make explicit within the quality framework where the responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement lies. In another it was noted that although matters relating to the management of quality and standards were addressed, they were 'not always systematically discussed, agreed and monitored within the academic management structure as intended'.

11 The committee structures used to debate quality assurance issues and to monitor quality assurance processes were considered in several audit reports, and institutions were advised to improve the clarity and consistency of these structures. According to one report, there was 'uncertainty as to roles and responsibilities of groups or committees in respect of both academic and executive structures for consultation and discussion of strategic planning, academic development and quality processes such as

those leading to programme approval' and the institution was advised to take appropriate action 'as a matter of urgency' [Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, 40]. In another, the institution was advised to examine the relationship between elements of its deliberative structure in order to ensure the establishment of 'a clear forum for debate and action on the wide range of quality issues'.

12 A number of the specialist institutions considered in this paper are small in size. In this context it should be noted that several of the associated audit reports took care to emphasise that a lack of formality in procedures does not necessarily imply a weakness in attending appropriately to the assurance of quality and standards. In this connection, for example, one report noted that informal groupings of administrative staff can make significant contributions to management structures. Although channels of communication and lines of accountability may appear unclear, the small size of an institution can help to ensure that confusion is minimised. Nevertheless, in such cases audit reports advised that clarity and consistency should be assured in a more formal manner.

Use of the Academic Infrastructure

13 With regard to the general use of the Academic Infrastructure developed by QAA with, and on behalf of, the higher education sector in the UK, some examples were noted in reports of good practice in its use in frameworks for managing quality and standards. For example, in one report it was concluded that the institution's consideration of aspects of the Academic Infrastructure had been careful and thorough [Royal College of Music, 77]. Another report noted that the institution had 'drawn carefully on the Agency's external reference points, including the *Code of practice [for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (the Code of practice)]*, the *[framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)]* and subject benchmark statements in reviewing its practices' and had incorporated these practices into its quality assurance procedures [Trinity and All Saints College, 45]. And a further report noted staff awareness of the Academic Infrastructure and their use of it in developing and operating their teaching programmes [Wimbledon School of Art, 86].

14 There were, however, a relatively large number of recommendations urging that improvements be made in the management of quality and standards by making greater use of the guidance embodied in the Academic Infrastructure. In the case of one institution it was found that there had been little engagement with the *Code of practice*, with the FHEQ, or with relevant subject benchmark statements, and the institution was advised 'as a matter of priority, to consider what measures are needed to enable it to engage with, and learn from, and contribute to the Academic Infrastructure developed by [QAA] on behalf of the UK [higher education] sector'.

15 Another audit report found that engagement with the Academic Infrastructure in that particular institution had been limited and unsystematic, and that institutional responses to developments in higher education on quality and academic standards had lacked strategic oversight. In this instance the institution was advised, as a matter of urgency, to address the weakness. In its annex to the report the institution subsequently declared its intention to ensure that the framework it uses for the management of quality and standards makes fuller use of the Academic Infrastructure.

16 In reporting on engagement with the precepts of the *Code of practice*, several audit reports for specialist institutions have drawn attention to the need for it to be used more systematically. Concern was also expressed in three reports about the limited awareness of the *Code of practice*, and indeed other parts of the Academic Infrastructure in the respective institutions, and also about slow progress in reviewing and implementing the good practice implicit in the *Code of practice*.

Approval, monitoring and review processes

17 Good practice in the operation of procedures for approval, annual monitoring and periodic review of provision for students was found in several of the audit reports of specialist institutions. Annual monitoring procedures were identified as an area of good practice in one report, for their 'strength and rigour' [Norwich College of Art and Design, 42] and in another they were described as 'evaluative, reflective and appropriately self-critical' [The Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College, 30]. Similarly, good practice was found in the processes used to approve new or revised programmes of study. For example, one report noted that processes used for approval were 'thorough and appropriate' and concluded that they were 'sound and robust' [Trinity College of Music, 39].

18 In some cases institutions had adapted processes so that they could be used to monitor and evaluate provision for student support as well as academic provision [Norwich College of Art and Design, 41-42; The Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College, 29]. Where it happened, this was identified as good practice with mention being made of the opportunities it gave for support staff to contribute to annual monitoring, and of the extended institutional perspective that resulted [Norwich School of Art and Design, 42].

19 In drawing attention to good practice, some reports mentioned the role of the Academic Infrastructure, and in particular the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, as assisting in the development of appropriate procedures for approving, monitoring and reviewing provision [Royal College of Art, 38; Trinity College of Music, 38; Royal College of Nursing Institute, 45; Writtle College, 35]. Other reports, however, indicated that a number of institutions had yet to consider and incorporate fully the implications of the relevant aspects of the Academic Infrastructure for their processes. For example, in a report which considered the introduction of new programme of study, it was stated that 'the team was unable to discern evidence of any subsequent formal mapping of this programme and its award against the [FHEQ] and the *Code of practice*'. And in another report it was stated that 'the extent to which the College has considered how its stance on periodic review is in line with the *Code of practice*...is unclear'.

20 Procedures for approving new programmes of study are important in ensuring that academic standards are maintained. If they are unclear or incomplete, or if they are not implemented, then standards are not effectively assured. In some institutions, the evidence made available showed that these risks were being taken. In such instances, implications for the level of confidence that could be placed in the relevant institutions' ability to maintain standards was indicated in the recommendations of the reports. Several such reports therefore indicated that steps needed to be taken,

as a matter of priority, to address the weaknesses that had been identified. All institutional audit reports provide opportunities for institutions to comment on the report via an annex published with the report. Those for these particular reports indicate that the weaknesses identified had been acknowledged and that action was being taken to strengthen procedures and ensure their implementation.

21 Most of the specialist institutions have procedures for periodically reviewing programmes of study. Audit reports did, however, advise that priority be given to making recommendations for expediting plans for their introduction where they were absent, that their scope be broadened where some provision was not included, and that they be completed in a timely fashion.

Assessment and external examining

22 Matters relating to the assessment of students' work are mentioned in several reports. Specialist institutions can face problems in assuring the appropriateness, consistency and reliability of the methods they use to evaluate, for example, artistic merit and musical performance. Good practice in this respect was observed and noted in some institutions. In one institution, for example, 'consolidation days' attended by all staff including part-time staff and external examiners, had been introduced in order to share information about assessment, including the styles of assessment specific to conservatoires, and to support greater consistency between departments [Royal Academy of Music, 143 i, 52]. In another institution, the report noted that much work had been done on developing assessment criteria for performance aspects of students' work, and that the clarity of the criteria used was evident in the improved consistency in the assessment of recitals. Good practice was also identified in the development of procedures for group assessment, with a pilot scheme being used to evaluate the potential benefits of its wider use [Trinity College of Music, 153 i, 30].

23 Elsewhere, however, reports noted that consistency in assessment practice presented particular challenges. Clear assessment criteria contribute substantially to assuring consistency and reliability, and some institutions were advised to be specific about the assessment criteria used to determine learning outcomes. But, as noted in one report, there can be difficulties in articulating criteria in relation to such key attributes as 'creativity' and 'imagination'. Indeed, as this report indicated, where these attributes are paramount there can be difficulties in formulating institution-wide descriptors for levels of student performance, linked to assessment criteria, in order to provide a secure basis for determining examination outcomes. Faced with such difficulties, the relevant audit report noted the progress that had been made and recommended that further developments should be accelerated.

24 Providing students with feedback on their work makes a significant contribution to the effectiveness of their learning, and the audit reports for specialist institutions show that some good practice has been developed. In one institution the report makes it clear that students appreciated the opportunity to obtain timely feedback on examinations as well as coursework; it gave them 'confidence in the transparency of the assessment process' [The School of Pharmacy, University of London, 99]. Other reports, though, show that students were not receiving timely feedback on their

assessed work, and institutions were advised to improve procedures intended to enable the achievement of the targets they had set themselves.

25 Effective use of external examiners and their reports is important in maintaining academic standards. In general, the reports for specialist institutions show that appropriate use is made of external examiners, and that their reports are considered in a satisfactory manner. A few reports note examples of good practice in this area. For example, one report noted 'the meticulous implementation and monitoring of the robust processes which enable the College to derive maximum benefit from...external examiners in the assurance and enhancement of quality and academic standards' [Trinity and All Saints College, 41]. In another report attention was drawn to the role that appropriate induction and continuing support can play in improving the practice of external examiners [University of Surrey, 37].

26 Several institutions had taken into account the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, and had either satisfied themselves that their practice was aligned with the precepts or had modified procedures and practices in order to achieve better alignment. In some cases, reports advised that further work on procedures and practice was needed. Thus, one institution was encouraged to investigate the extent to which its procedures and practice adhered to the guidance provided by the *Code of practice* concerning external examining. Another was advised to consider whether sufficient information was being provided to ensure institutional level oversight of external examiners reports and the responses to them.

27 In the case of one specialist institution, the audit report noted assessment practices which did not always distinguish clearly between the advisory role of an external professional specialist and the role of an external examiner. The report pointed out that however beneficial to students the advice of external experts might be, external examiners are appointed to advise the institution on the efficacy of assessment processes and they should not, therefore, be involved in the implementation of those processes.

28 Another institution's audit report noted that external examiners' reports were often received late, and that the institution did not require that external examiners receive a formal response to their comments and advice explaining what had been done to address any concerns they had expressed. This institution was advised to find means for ensuring the timely receipt of external examiners' reports, and for ensuring that external examiners are informed of action taken in response to their reports. Another institution, in which it did not appear that external examiners routinely received responses to their reports, was recommended to ensure that they are made aware of action being taken to address their concerns.

29 In some other reports it was noted that the responses to external examiners' reports was uneven in quality or limited in its scope. In these cases the institutions were recommended to take the necessary steps to ensure the usefulness of the contributions made by external examiners, by enabling and encouraging institutional responses to the reports which are analytical, reflective and comprehensive.

Student representation and feedback arrangements

30 Good practice in arrangements for the representation of student views and for their involvement in decision making was observed in several institutions [Royal Academy of Music, 61; Newman College of Higher Education, 83; Norwich School of Art and Design, 59; Rose Bruford College, 75]. The small size of some of the specialist institutions has, it appears, helped to ensure the effectiveness of informal as well as formal method for representing student opinion [Royal Academy of Music, 61; Norwich School of Art and Design, 59; Rose Bruford College, 75]. In one report, for example, it was stated that evidence from students and from documentation demonstrated that 'the student voice is clearly heard, and that students have ample informal opportunities to communicate their views at programme and college levels' [Rose Bruford College, 75].

31 Arrangements for obtaining good quality feedback from students were also singled out as constituting good practice in several institutions [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 55; London Business School, 89; The School of Pharmacy, University of London, 77; Trinity and All Saints College, 52]. In one institution it was found that prompt action was generally taken in response to the evaluative data provided by students, and that such data concerning previously offered elective courses was made available to students to inform their choice [London Business School, 89]. In another institution, good practice was observed in the provision of opportunities for students to evaluate elements of their programmes within an informal discursive context, which allowed them to engage more meaningfully with the process and to see its impact. In this case the institution was encouraged to build further on this good practice [Newman College of Higher Education, 95].

32 Recommendations regarding student representation included the advisability of greater consistency and effectiveness arrangements used, ensuring that students are able to participate in institutional-level decision making about quality assurance and enhancement, and improving the effectiveness of institutional-level representation. In some cases, it was noted, informal communication and an 'ethos in which contact between students and staff seems very effective' had been used to counter weaknesses in the formal arrangements.

33 In a number of institutions, improvements in the use, as well as the quantity and quality, of student evaluations were taking place in the light of experience, and several audit reports encouraged these development, while in others, reports indicated that there was need for a critical review of the arrangements in place in order to improve their effectiveness or to ensure their uniform operation across the institution. Attention was also drawn to the importance of analysing the evaluation information from students so that provision can be enhanced.

34 Specialist institutions frequently maintain contact with their graduates, and have valuable links with employers. Both graduates and employers sometimes contribute to the curriculum, and the guidance and advice they are able to offer to students is appreciated and was seen as making a significant contribution to the employability of graduating students. For the most part, feedback from graduates and employers is

informal and several reports indicated that this valuable source of information was not being used to the full. In such circumstances institutions were recommended to improve the effectiveness and reliability of feedback from employers and graduates in order to inform course design and evaluation.

Staff support and development arrangements

35 More than half of the reports for specialist institutions identify features of good practice in some aspect of the support and development of staff. These features included effective annual reviews, including evidence from peer observation of teaching [London Business School, 105; Norwich School of Art and Design, 69], schemes for identifying staff who would benefit from support [London Business School, 110], and for recognising and rewarding good teaching [Royal Veterinary College, 106-108]. Some reports referred to the development of a human resources strategy and drew attention to good practice in its implementation [Writtle College, 81; Wimbledon School of Art, 107-108].

36 Prominent among the features of good practice in supporting and developing staff were the ways in which institutions have provided opportunities for part-time staff, and technical staff [Royal Agricultural College, 10; The London Institute, 109-110, 114; Royal Northern College of Music, 64; Royal College of Nursing Institute, 85; Royal Academy of Music, 74; Royal College of Art, 78; Norwich School of Art and Design, 74]. Such staff, some of whom were involved in professional practice, were described as making a valuable contribution to the learning experience of students and it was widely recognised that appropriate and flexible arrangements to support their work were important. Thus, in one report it was noted that 'part-time teachers are alert to issues of quality ..., and are well-inducted into their role in the assessment of student achievement' [Royal Academy of Music, 74]. In another the role that technicians play in supporting student learning in the creative arts was acknowledged, as were the steps being taken by the institution to 'identify the appropriate forms of staff development and qualification which will enhance their roles as instructors'.

37 In some reports the support institutions were offering to staff supervising research students was also identified as good practice [Royal College of Nursing Institute, 88, 96-103; Wimbledon School of Art, 118]. To expand on this, one report identified the arrangements for appointing research supervisors, supporting their work by creating networking opportunities, and monitoring student progress, as constituting good practice [Royal College of Nursing Institute, 88].

38 There were almost as many recommendations in these audit reports as there were features of good practice, though the number of institutions involved was significantly fewer. A number of these were connected with weaknesses in the implementation of the human resource strategies that the institutions had developed. In one report, for an institution employing a high proportion of hourly paid staff, some of whom have significant responsibilities for examining, curriculum development and administration, there was reference to weaknesses in implementing an approved human resource strategy, and the institution's response indicated that priority would be given to 'implementation of a more systematic and robust staff

development programme'. Regular reviews or appraisals of staff were taking place, though there was mention in one report of a lack of institutional oversight of the outcomes of these reviews so that appropriate plans to meet the development needs of staff could be developed. Several institutions had made use of peer observation of teaching in order to support staff reviews; where it was lacking or needed further development, reports recommended that consideration should be given to its introduction, to its wider use, or to improving its effectiveness as a tool for enhancing students' learning experience.

Academic guidance and personal support

39 Academic guidance for students is a prominent theme in the reports, with almost all the specialist institutions able to demonstrate good practice in one or more aspects of the work they do. One reason for this is that a significant number of the specialist institutions focus on provision for research students, and the achievement of good completion rates for such students is dependent on the availability of good quality supervision and support [Institute of Education, University of London, 119; London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 85 and 87; Royal College of Art, 88; Royal College of Nursing Institute, 134-138; Wimbledon School of Art, 143-145]. In one report, for example, the institution was described as having 'a clearly defined and very effective support framework for research students, that is highly valued by the research students and serves their needs well' [Institute of Education, University of London, 119].

40 Several reports draw attention to the comments of students in their written submissions about the quality of the academic support made available to them. Almost always these comments were positive. For example, in one institution a unit providing students with opportunities to improve academic literacy and study skills was singled out for particular praise in the statement provided to QAA on behalf of the institution's students [Institute of Education, University of London, 72-73]. In another report a written submission prepared by students was quoted as saying that 'the level and quality of support that the current system renders is excellent', and the report concluded that all the institution's students are provided with a high level of effective academic support and guidance [Royal Academy of Music, 87].

41 Good practice was also acknowledged in the development of effective systems ensuring that students are provided with good quality support and guidance in their academic studies. A 'student centred' approach in such systems was especially appreciated by students, in that it provided a wide variety of academic support to meet the diverse needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students, including international students and students with disabilities [Trinity College of Music, 95-99; Royal College of Nursing Institute, 103]. Increasing student numbers make it difficult for institutions to maintain the effectiveness of their systems for providing academic advice, but it is clear from several of the reports for specialist institutions that the difficulties were being successfully addressed [Trinity and All Saints College, 74; Writtle College, 101-109].

42 Two reports drew attention to good practice in providing appropriate academic support for students experiencing difficulties with their studies, or might expect to do

so [Newman College of Higher Education, 130; The School of Pharmacy, University of London, 97-98; School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 125]. One of these reports noted the provision of support for students whose first language is not English, for those students admitted with non-traditional qualifications, as well as for those students identified as being at risk of not completing their studies [The School of Pharmacy, University of London, 97]. Such support was valued by students.

43 The theme of personal support and guidance for students is also prominent, with the reports for each of the conservatoires in particular citing aspects of this theme as constituting good practice. In one report, for example, it was noted that the institution 'has in place the structures, procedures and facilities to provide an integrated support system to meet the needs of its varied student population' [Royal Academy of Music, 99]. The system included extensive support for international students, welfare support to help students cope with the special pressures associated with a conservatoire environment, and careers education, information and guidance [Royal Academy of Music, 94-95 and 98]. In other reports, the work of a centre for careers guidance and employability in supporting students undertaking performance work and teaching outside the institution, and the institution's involvement in outreach community projects which provide students with opportunities for public performance, were identified a good practice [Royal College of Music, 113; Royal Northern College of Music, 80-81].

44 Several reports noted the development of personal support arrangements which were integrated so that students could expect a coordinated response to difficulties they may face [Newman College of Higher Education, 134 and 136; Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication 144; Writtle College, 110]. One of these reports noted the value of an integrated approach to personal support in the context of a widening participation strategy bringing students from wide and varied social backgrounds to the institution [Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, 143-144].

45 Success in supporting students' personal needs was associated in some reports with the small size of the institution and its creation of a 'friendly, caring ethos' [The School of Pharmacy, University of London, 106; Trinity College of Music, 107]. In such contexts, informal arrangements can work well and students can feel well supported [Rose Bruford College, 108; The Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College, 65]. It is clear, though, that some institutions are strengthening their arrangements, or increasing their scope in order to meet the needs of an increasingly varied student population, including greater numbers of part-time and international students.

46 A small number of reports called for further consideration of some aspect of support arrangements. The suggestions made draw attention to the importance of ensuring that staff responsible for student communicate effectively with each other and are clear about their responsibilities, that the scope of the support available meets all the legitimate needs of students, and that students are provided with good quality information about support arrangements in a way that ensures their attention is drawn to it.

Conclusions

47 Each of the 24 audit reports for specialist institutions published by November 2004 contains recommendations pointing to the adoption of systems and practices widely used elsewhere in the higher education sector to strengthen arrangements in order to better secure quality and academic standards. Again, in each case the brief appendix outlining the institution's response to the audit report indicated that appropriate remedial action was taking place or would be considered.

48 Overall, however, the evidence from the audit reports suggests that careful consideration is being given to the systems and processes used to assure academic standards and quality. Good practice was widely observed and there are features of it which could be of assistance as institutions in this area of the higher education sector seek to enhance their 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
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
Specialist institutions	July 2006
The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland	July 2006
Academic advice, guidance and supervision	tbc
Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and standards	tbc
Subject benchmark statements	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.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

QAA 116 06/06