

SCONUL GUIDELINES FOR QAA INSTITUTIONAL AUDIT IN ENGLAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

For Learning Resources, Information Services, Library and IT Services Staff

1. Nature of Institutional Audit

The revised Institutional Audit process for Higher Education in England and Northern Ireland is principally one of scrutinising institutional quality assurance systems to enable QAA to satisfy itself that they are effective, encourage continuous improvement and support its public statements about the quality of all awards across the sector. There is a strong emphasis on self-evaluation. It is intended that the new process will operate until 2010/11.

The aims of the revised process are to learn that:

- Awards are of a standard consistent with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*
- Institutions have effective means of providing learning opportunities for taught and research students to achieve their awards
- Institutions have effective means of enhancing quality, through monitoring, review and feedback from stakeholders.

The declared objectives include:

- To have confidence in the proper management of the quality of learning opportunities offered through the programmes of study
- To check that effective arrangements are in place to enhance the quality of postgraduate research programmes
- To contribute to the promotion and enhancement of quality in teaching, learning and assessment
- To ensure that the process enables rapid action to improve weaknesses or deficiencies in the management of academic standards or quality of provision
- To provide accountability for the use of public funds received by HEIs.

2. Changes to the institutional audit process

Variations resulting from the QAA's experience of the previous transitional system and the subsequent consultation include:

- A focus on the effectiveness of quality enhancement resulting from the HEI's QA procedures
- A strengthened emphasis on student participation in the audit
- Removal of Discipline Audit Trails, with new sampling trails to drill down to a more detailed level
- Two judgements, one on academic standards and one on the quality of learning opportunities
- A greater focus on postgraduate research programmes
- Introduction of the mid-cycle follow-up to replace the one-year-on report and the implementation of recommendations arising
- Reference to the *European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG)*

3. Collaborative Provision

Collaborative provision will be included in the audit, unless the extent of this activity necessitates a separate event focussing on the management of the HEI's collaborative provision.

4. Focuses

The QAA will concentrate their investigation on the following areas:

- Institutional management of academic standards
- Institutional management of learning opportunities, including learning resources, student support
- Institutional approach to quality enhancement
- Collaborative arrangements
- Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students
- Published information
- The views of students as expressed in a briefing paper from student representatives and subsequent meetings with groups of students.

5. Judgements

Judgements will be made in terms of confidence, limited confidence or no confidence in the areas of focus. They will not be applied to the academic standards themselves, but the security of these standards as embodied in the QA processes. Judgements about learning opportunities are not related to their actual quality, 'but rather about the way that the institution ensures that the learning opportunities available to students are of an appropriate quality'.

Recommendations will be described as 'essential', 'advisable' or 'desirable'.

6. Reference Points

Audit teams will make reference to the UK and European Academic Infrastructures, including the Framework for HE Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), the precepts of the Code of Practice (in particular section 1 on postgraduate research programmes), subject benchmark statements and will pay close attention to the internal Programme Specifications.

7. Sampling Trails

Audit teams will normally select two themes to investigate and sample from institutional to programme level, taking a vertical look at the implementation and outcomes of institutional policies and procedures. Only standard existing documentation will be required, including external examiners' reports, outcomes of internal review and NSS data. These trails will not be ends in themselves but examples of institutional policies and practices.

8. Quality Enhancement

There will be a particular focus on how an HEI's quality management system and use of management information leads to improvements in the quality of learning opportunities. Audit teams will look beyond the role of individuals in the enhancement of learning quality to the institutional ethos that supports and encourages it.

The QAA definition of 'enhancement' in the context of this audit is 'the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities.'

9. Briefing Paper

HEIs will be asked to provide a briefing paper on the approach taken to safeguarding the standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The paper should seek to answer the questions:

- What are we trying to do?
- Why are we doing it?
- How are we doing it?
- Why is that the best way to do it?

- How do we know it works?
- How can we improve it?

10. Students Written Submission

Students are invited to produce a written report to address a number of questions including:

- What is the student experience as a learner like?

11. Timetable

a) PRELIMINARY MEETING

24 weeks before the visit, to provide advice on the completion of the Briefing Paper and the Students' submission, and clarification of the scope of the exercise.

b) SUBMISSION OF BRIEFING PAPER AND STUDENT SUBMISSION

To be submitted 5 weeks before the Briefing Visit.

c) BRIEFING VISIT

5 weeks before the Audit visit, enabling the audit team to gain an understanding of the institution and its approaches to quality maintenance and enhancement, illustrated by documents referred to in the Briefing Paper and Student Submission, will last 3 days and will set the agenda and timetable for the audit visit.

d) AUDIT VISIT

- Will pursue agenda established at Briefing Visit
- Will seek to explore further institutional documentation on identified themes
- Will follow selected sampling trails
- Will meet a selection of staff and students identified in advance
- Will meet with a representative group of students
- Will last 5 days with up to 4 involving meetings with staff and students
- Will lead to a key findings letter followed by a report including levels of confidence, commentaries on quality enhancement, features of good practice and recommendations for action.
- Will not provide verbal feedback.

12. Mid-Cycle Follow-Up

This will take the form of a short health check on the HEI's continuing management of standards and quality and progress since the institutional audit. Normally this will take place three years after the audit.

13. Learning Resources

One of the principal concerns of the QAA is the quality of the student experience and whether it matches up to the HEI's public information provided to students. The written and verbal opinions of the students are being keenly sought within the audit process. Library, IT and learning resource provision are an important element of the learning opportunities offered to students and consequently may be a key element in these discussions. The suitability and adequacy of the resources, services, support and training provided by Information Services or Learning Resources departments is likely to be a topic in the discussion with students and course managers and therefore managers in these areas need to be prepared for any such discussion in several ways:

- If possible, contribute to the institutional briefing paper, or at least be able to read and amend any relevant statements made within it before it is sent to the QAA;
- Be aware of the content of the students' written submission and try to ensure that inaccurate statements about LR services are not included;
- Ensure that relevant documents are available as evidence of the department's consideration of academic programme and research needs and of student and staff consultation etc., e.g. annual reports, monitoring or review documents, minutes of management and academic liaison meetings,

user survey outcomes. (Such documentation will need to be already in existence. The creation of documentation to respond to auditor's enquiries will be discouraged.);

- Be ready in particular for questions relating to the provision of services and support to collaborative programmes, especially those which are taught off-site;
- Be aware of provision of for students with particular needs (accessability, international students, etc.)

14. Reference

QAA. Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006

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