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**Outcomes from institutional audit**  
**Learning support resources**  
**(including virtual learning**  
**environments)**  
**Second series**



**Sharing good practice**

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### Summary

Consideration of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006, indicates that, in general, higher education institutions have established effective arrangements to provide learning support resources, including virtual learning environments (VLEs).

Within the audit reports, learning support resources are taken to include information and communication technologies (ICT) including VLEs and resources for e-learning, libraries, reprographics, specialist resources for disciplines, teaching and learning accommodation, technical support and some elements of student support. The reports - all of which include commentaries on these matters - are mainly concerned with evaluating the effectiveness with which the resources, human and material, that support student learning, are deployed and managed, including students' views on them; less emphasis is given to the details of delivery.

Features of good practice concerning learning support resources are identified in 21 audit reports, while some 17 reports include recommendations on this area. There are 10 features of good practice and eight recommendations relating to VLEs. The recommendations include enhancing library resources and space, accommodation and deciding priorities regarding ICT provision. Overall, the reports indicate that institutions maintain a careful overview of the management of learning support resources and that, where problems occur, institutions are usually aware of them and take responsive action.

For the most part the audit reports indicate that institutions have central planning and management arrangements enabling them to ensure that learning support resources match students' academic needs, and that structures and processes are in place to ensure an equitable and effective allocation of resources. A minority, however, identify challenges such as multi-campus provision and increases in student numbers; when unresolved these typically lead to recommendations.

In addition, the audit reports indicate that institutions provide successful student induction and training programmes, and that student expectations regarding resources, which may be managed by institutions, are generally realised. The reports also reveal that staff, too, appreciate opportunities for developing their knowledge and skills, especially in relation to e-learning and VLEs.

The audit reports also show that programme approval arrangements invariably include the consideration of learning support resources, the input of service providers and whether programme proposals are aligned with institutional resource strategies. Where audit teams consider risks to the quality of learning opportunities exist, for example, from prospective increases in student numbers, recommendations are normally made. Institutions employ several methods for monitoring learning support resources, including audits by central services, student and staff feedback, annual monitoring and reports on service departments.

VLEs appear to be increasingly prevalent; where they exist they appear to be organised systematically, with increasing use made of proprietary and single systems and most institutions being aware of the resource implications. Whilst VLEs are becoming established, often being used imaginatively and being widely appreciated by staff as well as students, the audit reports also indicate that levels of use and uptake vary considerably within and between institutions.

### 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'. To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of its institutional audits, QAA produces short working papers describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the audit reports. Since 2005 these have been published under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit* (hereafter, *Outcomes...*). The first series of these papers drew on the findings of the audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004. This paper is based on the findings of the institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006. It includes a brief section at the end of the paper which compares its key features with those of its predecessor in the first series of *Outcomes...* papers.

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 listings in paragraphs 5 and 32, 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 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 and second series of *Outcomes...* papers can be found at Appendix 3 (page 21).

As noted above, this second series of *Outcomes...* papers is based on the 59 institutional audit reports published by August 2006, and the titles of papers are in most cases the same as their counterparts in the first series of the *Outcomes...* papers. Like the first series of *Outcomes...* papers, those in the second 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 its website and cited, with acknowledgement.

## Introduction and general overview

1 This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 59 institutional audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 (see Appendix 1, page 17). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in this second Outcomes...series can be found at Appendix 4 (page 23).

2 According to the *Handbook for Institutional Audit: England (2002)*, at the centre of the process is an emphasis on students - in terms of the quality of the information they receive about their programmes of study, the ways in which their learning is facilitated and supported, and the academic standards that they are expected to achieve, and do achieve in practice. For the purposes of the institutional audit process (and this paper) learning support resources include information and communication technology (ICT), libraries, reprographics, specialist equipment or activities, teaching space and some elements of student support.

3 Audit reports are charged with describing the institution's view of its learning support resources, its approach to ensuring their adequacy and the student view of the quality of those resources, analysing the evidence provided by the institution, and commenting on how the institution satisfies itself that its arrangements in these areas meet its requirements. The reports regularly refer to the introduction and existence of virtual learning environments (VLEs) in addition to other learning and teaching support arrangements. Accordingly, the second part of this paper is devoted to a consideration of VLEs in institutions' learning support arrangements (see paragraphs 25-36).

4 The 59 audit reports under consideration in this paper suggest that overall institutions provide provision for learning support resources consistent with their missions and that they have strategies and processes enabling them to plan and monitor their learning support resources and ensure their continuing relevance to student needs.

## Features of good practice

5 The audit reports contain references to a number of features of good practice in relation to learning support resources. These are listed below. [Where the relationship of the feature of good practice to learning support resources may not be immediately clear some explanatory text is added in square brackets.]

- The widespread use of the University's research environment and links with industry to enhance the quality of learning opportunities [Cranfield University, paragraph 196 iv; paragraph 94]
- the targeted support available to particular categories of students, such as disabled, mature and postgraduate research students [University of Hull, paragraph 216 v; paragraphs 108, 112, 115 and 118]
- library and [information technology] support services which are well resourced and informed about and responsive to the needs and preferences of users [University of Surrey, paragraph 221 (third bullet point); paragraphs 100 to 106]

- the high level of staff commitment to student support, in particular at programme and module level [in particular, a scheme which involves second year and higher level students being trained to work on a one-to-one basis with other students to help them identify and solve study skills problems (paragraph 145)] [University of Derby; paragraph 294 (fourth bullet point); paragraphs 145, 158 and 159]
- the strong student focus of the University's development plans, as demonstrated by a number of initiatives including the development of the de Havilland Campus, the Learning Resource Centres and the Student Centre [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 204 i; paragraphs 5, 93 to 97 and 99]
- the coherence of the University's progress towards placing the student experience at the heart of its enterprise [in particular, the effective mechanisms for ensuring that its learning resources provision is appropriate, for identifying areas for improvement and for responding appropriately to identified developmental needs through the contribution of the Learning and Information Service (paragraph 104)] [Leeds Metropolitan University, paragraph 217 i; paragraphs 38, 104 and 109]
- the use of the Library Liaison Group as a forum for liaison between the University library and libraries in the partner colleges [University of Luton, paragraph 251 iii; paragraph 112]
- the online [Personal Information Portal] developed by the University for its students [Oxford Brookes University, paragraph 250 ii; paragraphs 112, 141 and 193]
- the active use and continuous development of the staff and student intranet portals, allowing both currency of information and relevance of communication to be maintained during a period of extensive organisational change [University of Plymouth, paragraph 244 i; paragraph 45]
- [the] maintenance and enhancement of learning support resources as a key priority and the provision of high-quality technician support [University of Sunderland, paragraph 206 iii; paragraphs 101 to 104]
- the range, accessibility and utility of the learning resources provided to students, including those in the partner institutions [University of Teesside, paragraph 219 ii; paragraph 97]
- the contribution made by the learning technology advisers to the development of new technologies for teaching and learning [University of East London, paragraph 256 vi; paragraphs 107 and 113]
- the effectiveness of the relationship between Library Services and the faculties in ensuring that user needs are met [University of the West of England, paragraph 257 iv; paragraphs 111 and 166]
- the student focused culture to support the development of students through, for example: representation, consultation and collaboration with the Students' Union, the open-door policy of academic staff, the tutoring system, the proactive institutional support mechanisms, and the extent and usage of the Student Experience Survey [in particular, the use of Student Experience Survey in the

annual Learning and Information Services report (paragraph 103)]  
[Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, paragraph 238 iii; paragraphs 75, 77, 103, 114, 123, 124 and 195]

- the work of the [Research and Knowledge Transfer] Centre, especially in its support for postgraduate research students and in the enhancement of a postgraduate research culture [in particular the widely used 'drop in centre' providing support and advice, specialist research resources and office facilities (paragraph 115)] [University College Winchester, paragraph 257 ii; paragraphs 42, 115, 131, 133 and 134]
- the provision of the e-Library, which is notable for highly relevant and carefully selected material to support students' learning [Henley Management College, paragraph 213 vi; paragraph 120]
- the high level of resources made available to support student learning [University of Manchester, paragraph 211 i; paragraphs 83-85]
- the success of the Centre for Learning Technology and the Teaching and Learning Centre in supporting learning and teaching [London School of Economics and Political Science, paragraphs 50 and 57]
- the clear link between student feedback and action at all levels within the institution and its collaborative partners [in particular, learning resource development plans were generally well judged, appropriate, and reflected student evaluations (paragraph 100)] [University of Central England in Birmingham, paragraph 219 i; paragraphs 75 and 100]
- the effective way in which the University deploys its financial and physical resources in support of learning and teaching [in particular, the mechanisms to identify and respond to user need and to assure the quality of its learning support resources, and that resource allocation is linked to the focus on learning and teaching (paragraph 110)] [University of Worcester, paragraph 250 iii; paragraphs 110 and 221]
- the provision of library services, and especially the role of the subject librarians [The Arts Institute at Bournemouth, paragraph 211 iv; paragraphs 121 and 122].

Features of good practice identified in connection with VLEs are listed in paragraph 32, below.

### Themes

6 In the 59 audit reports considered, the major themes relating to the provision of learning support resources (excluding VLEs), drawn from reviewing the features of good practice and recommendations include:

- structures and strategies for learning support resources
- learning resource planning in the development of new provision, monitoring and periodic review
- learning support resource planning in developing new provision
- setting appropriate expectations among staff and students

- training users of learning support resources
- monitoring the effectiveness of learning support resources
- learning support resources for e-learning
- feedback on learning support resources from students.

A similar approach is adopted for VLEs and a final section to the paper includes a comparison with the themes and findings in the equivalent paper in Series 1.

### Structure and strategy

7 Institutional audit seeks to identify the long-term planning process for learning support resources and those responsible for it. Among other things this involves analysing the relationships between and among relevant senior managers, departments, schools or faculties, and service departments. Accordingly, most audit reports refer to institutional organisational arrangements, noting how they manage learning support resources and drawing attention to such relevant variables as multi-campus provision, the development of new campuses, partner colleges, extensive distance-learning provision and plans to expand student numbers. Most audit reports show that management arrangements enable institutions to ensure that learning support resources match students' academic needs, identify resource needs and monitor effectiveness. Examples of the management of learning support provision identified by the reports as features of good practice include 'the strong focus on the [institution's] development plans, as demonstrated by a number of initiatives including the development of the de Havilland Campus, the Learning Resources Centre and the Student Centre' [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 204 i] and 'the effective way in which the University deploys its financial and physical resources in support of learning and teaching', referring to efforts to improve learning support resources, and to respond to the needs of users [University of Worcester, paragraph 250 iii].

8 Most recommendations as to structure and strategy for learning support resources focus on the inadequacy of mechanisms for their central management and decision-making processes regarding such resources, and on a lack of evidence of an effective means of ensuring that such resources meet student needs. One audit report found no reference at all to learning support resources in the institution's learning and teaching strategy. Several reports refer to the complexity of ensuring parity of provision in a multi-campus context. One report was influenced not only by the audit team's observations but also by negative student comments about learning support resources on a new campus. The institution was recommended to take a strategic approach to such resources. Another institution was recommended to ensure equivalent cross-campus access; and the attention of a further institution was drawn to timetabling problems on multi-campus provision, which affected joint honours students particularly. This contributed to a wider recommendation on the need to ensure equivalence of experience for such students.

9 A number of audit reports make the point that learning support resource strategies involve both service groups and academic units. In particular, the relationship between academic units and the library was regarded as a feature of good practice in four cases [University of West of England, Bristol, paragraph 111;

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth, paragraph 121; University of Surrey, paragraph 106; University of Luton, paragraph 112]. In the first of these effective delivery of learning support resources was facilitated by 'collaborative partnerships between faculties and services resulting in agreed plans, implementation understandings and service agreements' [University of West of England, Bristol, paragraph 111]. In another, Discipline Support Plans were used to support library liaison with academic departments, and an informal Library Liaison Group for librarians from the institution and its partners assisted the support of users at these sites [University of Luton, paragraph 112]. One report noted a requirement for every school or institute to have a learning resource committee or equivalent to facilitate communication between providers and users. Other features of good practice were identified for the learning support provided by central support departments, for example, for students with a range of special needs [University of Hull, paragraph 108] and for dyslexic students [University of Derby, paragraph 145].

### Learning support resource planning in the development of new provision, monitoring and periodic review

10 The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review* (2000) stated that in the course of the approval process consideration should be given to the resources needed and available to support the programme, and that institutions should monitor the effectiveness of learning support resources in their programmes. Almost all the audit reports comment positively on the guidance provided in quality handbooks on matters to be discussed in approval, annual monitoring and periodic reviews, including learning support resources. Comments by most staff and students noted in the reports suggest that library, accommodation, ICT access and support and specialist facilities provide a sufficient resource to support the academic programme and meet student needs.

11 The monitoring of learning support resources is discussed in more detail below (paragraphs 20-22).

### Learning support resource planning in developing new provision

12 A number of audit reports refer to the contribution to the development of new provision made by staff responsible for learning support resources. One report referred to an institution having recently revised its approval process to ensure an increased emphasis on contributions from, among others, library and ICT staff. Other reports describe institutions' arrangements for ensuring that new programmes are consistent with resource strategies. These often require approval procedures to match potential demand with resources and link the development of learning resources to academic planning.

13 Some audit reports refer to the implications of increasing student numbers for programme approval and the importance of an institutional strategy which equates projected numbers with learning resources. Hence, one institution planning an increase in student numbers was recommended 'to manage the availability of teaching and learning space so as to safeguard the quality of the learning

environment, in the context of its strategy for increasing student numbers'. This is discussed below, paragraph 15. Another was recommended to monitor the effectiveness of its strategic resource planning to secure effective forecasting and the quality of the learning experience, particularly that relating to space in the library. A third was recommended to consider the adequacy of its validation procedures for non-standard programmes including those demanding a high level of technical support.

### Setting appropriate expectations among staff and students

14 The audit reports considered for the purpose of this paper provided little information on how institutional expectations in respect of learning support are set. Since the majority of reports expressed satisfaction with the resources available, it appears that the expectations of students were broadly met. Only a few reports make reference to the requirements or expectations of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies and how institutions were meeting them.

15 Most audit reports, drawing on evidence supplied in student surveys, student written submissions and meetings with students in the course of the audit, indicate high levels of student satisfaction with the learning support resources available to them. Where this was not the case the causes were mainly associated with pressure deriving from increases in student numbers, or from defects in planning. In one institution, for example, the student written submission, as cited in the audit report, relayed student dissatisfaction resulting from overcrowding. The report noted the steps that the institution was taking to alleviate this situation, and recommended the further management of teaching and learning space. In another case, inadequate planning led to a recommendation that the institution concerned should ensure 'that student expectations and needs are taken fully into account when deciding on priorities for the development of...ICT provision'.

16 A number of institutions provide formal guidelines on student entitlement, although in one case the relevant audit report noted that these were not always adhered to locally. More positively, another institution had undertaken a review of resources, using as a benchmark an external statement on minimum resources for a specific discipline. Where some reports referred to students' expectations of access to books not being met, it was notable that a number of institutions were responding to this by defining student entitlement and clearly endeavouring to meet it. It is clear, however, that where special circumstances, including multi-campus provision, distance learning, part-time students, programmes with work-based learning, those requiring high levels of specialist resources or sandwich programmes exist, most institutions are aware of the need to specify entitlements. Almost all the reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 contain complimentary comments from students about the support they receive from academic, technical and library staff and observations on how well their expectations are met. It is also clear that institutions have become conscious of expectations regarding access to ICT facilities, including e-learning, VLEs, the internet and intranets, and that in most cases in their resource planning activities they integrate these into their provision portfolio.

17 In the majority of the audit reports, the information students received relating to their programmes was reported as providing an accurate reflection of the learning support resources available. Where dissatisfaction existed there was evidence that institutions were working to minimise it and respond appropriately. For example, in the course of a discipline audit trail, one report noted the effectiveness of course committees and informal contact in resolving the matters raised by students. While there was some dissatisfaction regarding learning support resources, the faculty had adopted a Learning Resources Strategy, and formed a monitoring group to give added consideration to computing needs. The report encouraged the relevant faculty to consider further how it might engage with students and respond to student needs.

### Training for users of learning support resources

18 It is clear from the audit reports that, in setting realistic expectations for staff and students, most institutions provide users of learning support resources with information and training. In some cases staff development opportunities are provided for ICT (including VLEs) through regular workshops. Staff appear to be generally complimentary about the support they receive. A number of reports identify this support as a feature of good practice: in one institution, for example, 'the active use and continuous development of the staff and student intranet portals, [allowed] both currency of information and relevance of communication to be maintained during a period of extensive organisational change [University of Plymouth, paragraph 45]. Another institution's Information Systems Directorate provided a wide range of training and a generic ICT induction/proficiency test to help identify existing skills and appropriate training, as well as making available a wide range of online training packages, workbooks and exercises [University of Manchester, paragraph 84].

19 It is also clear that in many instances students appreciated the induction to the available resources with which they are provided. In one institution this extended to the provision of training for students who brought their own laptops or personal computers on-campus; another report noted the availability of the European Computer Driving Licence through a free elective module.

### Monitoring the effectiveness of learning support resources

20 The published audit reports illustrate a range of methods institutions deploy for monitoring learning support resources, including annual and periodic reviews (covering, for example, staffing, staff development and resources), scrutiny by faculty and central resource committees, reports from service departments, student surveys and minutes of meetings with learning resource staff. Annual review reports appear to provide generally robust evaluations of central and school resources, sometimes strengthened by annual audits of topics/themes in faculties. In some cases discussion of learning support resources is a standing item on agendas in annual reviews and consideration of such resources is embedded in committee structures. The reports note that in some institutions resources for information services are benchmarked against national data and benchmarks, although this does not appear to be common practice.

21 The enhancement focus and responsiveness of one institution's monitoring were jointly identified as a feature of good practice. The audit report described the role of the learning support staff in developing partnerships with faculties, evaluating appropriate learning support resources, publicising new services and acting as a conduit for feedback. The report also went on to note the Learning and Information Service's methods of continuing evaluation to ensure that users' views were taken into account, and the clear processes for flexible resource allocation. [Leeds Metropolitan University, paragraph 104].

22 A number of audit reports make recommendations in respect of monitoring learning support resources. One report stated that many of the resources available appeared below reasonable expectations for degree-level study but that the institution was possibly not in a position to know whether this was in fact so, and recommended that the institution should improve both its external benchmarking and medium-term planning. A further institution made little mention of learning support resources in annual review reports, despite student criticisms, whilst another was recommended to develop its quality assurance arrangements for e-learning.

### Learning support resources for e-learning

23 The majority of audit reports refer to institutions giving high priority to investing in, developing and managing e-learning, and sharing good practice. Many appear to have invested heavily to meet growing demand; one, for example, had established a Research Centre for E-learning to provide a suite of checks for planning, design and development. E-learning is clearly utilised in a number of ways: to offer resource support by supplying necessary learning and teaching documentation; to provide independent learning activity within a traditionally delivered module (blended learning); and to replace face-to-face delivery (normally in postgraduate programmes). In some cases e-learning has clearly become integral to programme delivery. Some institutions have established e-libraries and one report identified this as a feature of good practice, noting positive student views of the e-library's accessibility, ease of use and reliability, and confirming the institution's careful induction arrangements for e-learning [Henley Management College, paragraph 120].

24 A number of audit reports comment favourably on the support offered by technicians, advisers and learning technology centres; in one institution the contribution of learning technology advisers to the development of teaching and learning technologies was identified as a feature of good practice [University of East London, paragraphs 107 and 113].

25 A small number of audit reports make recommendations on learning support resources for e-learning. One institution was recommended to 'review the different arrangements for student access to the intranet especially when away from campus'. Another report noted an institution's plans for significant growth in e-learning and the considerable changes that were being made to its management arrangements and provision. In the context of the particular challenges posed by distributed learning the report recommended the institution to 'move to a more centrally coordinated approach to the provision, utilisation and quality assessment of e-learning, with a greater emphasis on pedagogical consideration'.

### Feedback on learning support resources from students

26 The audit reports comment on how students' views on all aspects of learning support resources are elicited and monitored. The methods used for doing so include focus groups, consultative groups, surveys, library comment boxes, learning resource meetings, annual monitoring reports and online systems and, in addition, some students' unions were active in gathering their members' views. In most cases students are reported as being satisfied with institutional responses to their comments, although a number of institutions recognised a need to improve the effectiveness with which they gathered students' views, in particular, to achieve higher rates of return and speedier responses.

27 Two audit reports identified features of good practice in respect of feedback: in one case this related to institutional responsiveness (including that of collaborative partners), and noted that student evaluations of learning support resources had 'clearly informed the development of these resources in relation to access, opening hours and computer facilities' [University of Central England in Birmingham, paragraph 75]. In the other, the existence and annual monitoring of student satisfaction surveys, in respect of library resources and services, attracted positive comment [University of Manchester, paragraph 83]. Other institutions made use of key performance indicators, in one case deploying an international user survey. A number of institutions were identified as taking steps to ensure that feedback is addressed at all levels. In one institution a Priority Research Survey provided data down to school level, while another sent such data to two user fora, both of which included staff and student representation and which reported to Academic Board.

### Learning support resources: some conclusions

28 Overall, the survey of institutional audit reports conducted for the present paper suggests that the majority of institutions have in place structures and processes designed to manage learning support resources efficiently, and can demonstrate a reasonably integrated approach to ensuring the existence of equitable and comparable levels of resources; some point to strategic attempts to provide overviews of the resources available. Partly by setting realistic expectations, most institutions are able to plan resource allocation, and students generally express satisfaction with the range of resources available. In most cases student feedback is actively sought, and responded to appropriately, often in a spirit of enhancement, but not without a proper degree of self-criticism and reflection.

### Virtual learning environments (VLEs)

29 According to the Joint Information Systems Committee (the body responsible for the promotion of ICT in education and research in the UK), a VLE is 'an electronic system that can provide on-line interactions of various kinds that can take place between learners and tutors, including on-line learning' [www.jisc.ac.uk]. The same source notes the main functions of a VLE as follows:

- 'controlled access to a curriculum that has been mapped to elements (or "chunks") that can be separately assessed or recorded

- tracking of student activity and achievement against these elements to allow tutors to set up a course with materials and activities to direct, guide and monitor learner progress
- support of on-line learning, including access to learning support resources, assessment and guidance. The learning support resources may be self-developed, professionally authored or purchased materials
- communication between the learner, the tutor and other specialists to provide support and feedback for learners, as well as peer group communications that build up a sense of group identity and community of interest
- links to other administrative systems, both in-house and externally'.

30 Where audit reports mention VLEs, it is these features that are applied, although it is recognised that not all forms of e-learning are included within this definition.

31 Institutions have introduced internally developed VLE systems with varying degrees of sophistication. Whilst some are well advanced, others are in various stages of development. The audit reports point to the appreciation of both students and staff for VLEs, although some note that students have spoken of a need for further development and fewer variations in the levels of usage. Generally, institutions have shown high levels of commitment to the use of, and funding for, VLEs, which they clearly see, actually or potentially, as a significant contributor to their learning and teaching strategies.

32 The published audit reports contain references to a number of features of good practice relating to VLEs. These are listed below. [Where the relationship of the feature of good practice with VLEs may not be immediately clear some explanatory text is added in square brackets].

- The University's use of its VLE, both as a pedagogical and communications medium, and the plans for its future development [Sheffield Hallam University, paragraph 202 v; paragraph 93]
- the culture of enhancement with, for example, benchmarking of the University College performance, the work of the School of Continuing Professional Education, and the extensive uptake of staff development opportunities [in particular, those opportunities that enable staff to make better use of the VLE (paragraph 92)] [Buckinghamshire and Chilterns University College, paragraph 238 iv; paragraphs 36, 82, 92, 96, 198, 207 and 235]
- the framework for the quality management of distance-learning programmes - particularly in relation to assuring the quality of distance-learning materials, specifying the functions and managing the work of agents, and defining the roles and responsibilities of associate tutors [University of Leicester, paragraph 287 iii; paragraph 121]
- the responsive and, simultaneously, strategic role of [Educational and Staff Development] in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning across the institution [in particular, initiatives to encourage the use of the VLE through offering assistance to staff in its use (paragraph 127)] [Queen Mary, University of

London, paragraph 245 (third bullet point); paragraphs 114, 122 and 127]

- the use made of electronic communication systems, particularly the virtual learning environment to support flexible and blended learning and communicating with students, and Desktop Anywhere [University of Northumbria at Newcastle, paragraph 254 iv; paragraph 118]
- the strategic implementation and development of, and support for, the VLE [Liverpool John Moores University, paragraph 233 (third bullet point); paragraphs 108-112]
- the design, development and utilisation of the University's managed learning environment StudyNet, which offers outstanding potential for the University's planned move towards a pedagogy of blended learning [University of Hertfordshire, paragraph 204 v; paragraphs 157 to 165]
- the seamless way in which the College's intranet system provides a virtual learning environment and information about all aspects of the College's management and governance arrangements [University of Chester, paragraph 194 iii; paragraph 82]
- [the University's] draft e-learning strategy, which maps on to the e-learning framework developed by the Joint Information Systems Committee [in particular, comprehensive nature of the strategy, which seeks to integrate developments in the use of the VLE and the website and to address other new developments (paragraph 137)] [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 317 iii; paragraph 137]
- the comprehensive, accurate and accessible information provided to students including the Student Portal which allows seamless access to a variety of e-learning resources [University of Nottingham, paragraph 302 iii, paragraphs 102, 139, 166, 187, 204, 223 and 240].

### Themes

33 Consideration of the 59 institutional audit reports in respect of VLEs suggests the following themes to be addressed:

- the introduction of VLEs
- the use of developed VLE systems.

### The introduction of VLEs

34 The gradual and cautious approach to the development of VLEs adopted by many institutions during the period covered by this paper means that they are perhaps best seen as work in progress, with some institutions more advanced than others, some developing their own systems and others purchasing proprietary brands.

35 Among the institutions which have successfully established VLEs, the audit reports reveal that some have identified groups of staff to promote their development, for example, by appointing 'VLE champions', a 'Development Officer', a 'Learning Technology Officer', a 'Development Projects Steering Group' and a 'Networked Learning Group' for VLEs. One institution established an 'e-lab' with specialist staff and appointed a Professor of E-learning 'to provide pedagogical guidance regarding electronic learning technologies'; another created senior teaching fellowships for

developing the VLE; and in another a Centre for Excellence in Learning Technology supported by a staff fellowship scheme proved crucial to the successful development of the VLE. Others were taking a slightly different course, introducing VLEs as part of a blended learning strategy and working closely with e-learning coordinators.

36 Furthermore, the audit reports suggest that institutions are increasingly integrating VLEs with their central e-learning and learning and teaching strategies, and are relying less on individual or departmental enthusiasm; there is also a trend towards adopting a single system and relying less on different types of VLEs. One report made a recommendation to give priority to the development of an institution-wide VLE strategy and set targets for usage. Another institution's draft e-learning strategy, seen as comprehensive and as integrating VLE developments with the institution's website and with other new developments, was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Huddersfield, paragraph 137]. Other features of good practice were identified in one institution's strategic development, implementation and support for, its VLE [Liverpool John Moores University, paragraph 112] and, slightly more tangentially, in another's responsive and strategic use of staff development in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning across the institution, which included staff involvement in trials of VLEs [Queen Mary, University of London, paragraph 127].

### The use of developed VLE systems

37 The audit reports refer to institutions putting their VLEs to a wide range of uses. These include giving extra support to part-time students; delivering programmes on multi-sites; providing students with module information, learning materials and general institutional information; supporting communications in collaborative provision; providing blended and flexible learning; developing distance-learning training, and developing staff assessment and feedback skills; providing a remedial mathematics programme; supporting students on work placements; reporting student feedback (including putting relevant committee minutes on the system); and communicating annual programme reports.

38 Some institutions have extended their use of VLEs into teaching and assessment, and there is evidence of VLEs being especially useful in postgraduate provision. One institution supported almost a third of its postgraduate programmes through the VLE. Another gave doctoral students access to a 'virtual classroom'; yet another had developed a virtual library - a comprehensive online facility enabling students to access full-text online journals. In a further institution the Student Portal was a major means of access to a wide range of electronic resources, including the VLE [University of Nottingham, paragraph 101]. In another case an audit report identified as a feature of good practice the seamless way in which the institution's intranet provided a VLE and information about all aspects of management and governance [University of Chester, paragraph 82].

39 The themes on which the audit reports focus include variations in VLE usage between and within departments, disparities between target and actual usage (and how to reduce them) and monitoring take up. These themes reflect in good part the views expressed by students, which varied between enthusiasm for the learning

support provided by one institution's VLE and disappointment in another case that not all programmes made full use of it. One report recommended the institution to specify a minimum standard of VLE usage for all courses. Another considered it unclear how the institution's target for the active use of the VLE was to be met given that the associated staff development was optional. A further report, noting that usage targets were included in the institution's strategic plan, also mentioned its implications for staff development; yet another drew favourable attention to an institution's attempt to address this matter by establishing faculty-level mentors and development projects.

40 A number of audit reports refer to the sometimes variable quality of VLE learning materials. Two institutions were recommended to monitor and enhance the quality of their materials, and a third was recommended to build on the observations it offered in the self-evaluation document by developing its quality assurance arrangements for e-learning, including establishing and effectively implementing an editorial policy for publishing material through its website. More positively, one report identified as a feature of good practice the institution's 'framework for the quality management of distance-learning programmes - particularly in relation to assuring the quality of distance-learning materials, specifying the functions and managing the work of agents, and defining the roles and responsibilities of associate tutors' [University of Leicester, paragraph 121].

### VLEs: some conclusions

41 It is clear from the audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 that the majority of institutions were aware of both the potential of VLEs - not least for supporting distance learning - and the resource implications, and had adopted a cautious approach to their development. Staff and students appreciated the access to, and support received through, VLEs which were generally well-managed and monitored, and integrated into institutions' overall learning and teaching developments. Nonetheless, during the period covered by this series of reports it is clear that the development of VLEs varied, with some reports pointing to uneven development and usage within institutions.

### Overall conclusions and a comparison of the findings of this paper with those of the corresponding paper in Series 1

42 Half of the 59 audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006 contained features of good practice concerned with learning support resources and/or VLEs, compared with about one third in the audit reports published between 2003 and November 2004. It is noticeable that in the audit reports in this second series, features of good practice were more likely than those in the first series to refer specifically to learning technology (e-learning, VLEs, technical support), and 10 features of good practice were related to VLEs, as against five in the corresponding paper in *Outcomes...* series one. It can be inferred from this that the relevant reports had formed positive views about the increasing use of such technology in supporting learning, and about the systematic and effective nature of its development and management.

43 Where recommendations were made, those in the audit reports published after December 2004 more frequently concerned access for different groups of students (part-time, multi-campus, joint honours) and matching resources to increasing student numbers than was the case in the first series of reports. A minority of reports in both series point to the need for more strategic approaches for developing and managing learning support resources and for improving library provision. Generally, however, reports in both series note the high quality of learning support resources provided by institutions, that they are generally matched with the needs of programmes and are aligned with institutions' overall strategies for learning and teaching.

44 Whereas recommendations in the first series of audit reports predominantly encouraged more careful and strategic consideration to be given to the development of VLEs, the reports published from December 2004 tended to find evidence for more centrally and institutionally managed approaches to VLEs and that developments were more clearly focused with less reliance on individual enthusiasm. Nonetheless, this second series also highlighted continued variability in the deployment of VLEs both within and between institutions.

## Appendix 1 - The institutional audit reports

### Note

In the period covered by these papers a number of institutions underwent a variety of scrutiny procedures for taught degree-awarding powers, university title and research degree-awarding powers. Reports of the individual scrutiny processes were provided to QAA's Advisory Committee on Degree-Awarding Powers, and its Board of Directors, and formed the basis for advice to the Privy Council on the applications made by the respective institutions.

In most cases the scrutiny processes also provided information which, in the form of a bespoke report, QAA accepted as the equivalent of an institutional audit report. Only those reports which conform to the general pattern of the institutional audit reports are included in the list below.

### 2004-05

City University

Cranfield University

University of Hull

University of Leicester

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

University of Nottingham

The Queen's University Belfast

University of Surrey

University of Ulster

Goldsmiths College, University of London

Queen Mary, University of London

Royal Holloway and Bedford New College (Royal Holloway, University of London)

University of London

University College London

Birkbeck College, University of London

Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (Imperial College London)

St George's Hospital Medical School

University of Derby

De Montfort University

University of Gloucestershire

University of Hertfordshire  
Sheffield Hallam University  
University of Huddersfield  
Kingston University  
London Metropolitan University  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Liverpool John Moores University  
University of Luton<sup>1</sup>  
University of Northumbria at Newcastle  
Oxford Brookes University  
University of Plymouth  
Staffordshire University  
London South Bank University  
University of Sunderland  
University of Teesside  
University of East London  
University of the West of England, Bristol  
University of Westminster  
Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College<sup>2</sup>  
Canterbury Christ Church University College<sup>3</sup>  
University of Chester  
Liverpool Hope University  
University College Winchester<sup>4</sup>  
Henley Management College  
Harper Adams University College  
Conservatoire for Dance and Drama  
American InterContinental University - London

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<sup>1</sup> Now the University of Bedfordshire

<sup>2</sup> Now Buckinghamshire New University

<sup>3</sup> Now Canterbury Christ Church University

<sup>4</sup> Now the University of Winchester

**2005-06**

University of Manchester

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

University of Bolton

Thames Valley University

University of Central England in Birmingham<sup>5</sup>

University of Worcester

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

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<sup>5</sup> Now Birmingham City University

## **Appendix 2 - Reports on specialist institutions**

### **2004-05**

Birkbeck College, University of London

Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine (Imperial College London)

St George's Hospital Medical School

Henley Management College

Harper Adams University College

Conservatoire for Dance and Drama

American InterContinental University - London

### **2005-06**

Courtauld Institute of Art

Heythrop College

University of London External System

London School of Economics and Political Science

Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies

Dartington College of Arts

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

### **Appendix 3 - Titles of *Outcomes from institutional audit papers, Series 2***

In most cases, *Outcomes...* papers will be no longer than 20 sides of A4. Projected titles of *Outcomes...* papers in the second series are listed below in provisional order of publication.

The first series of papers can be found on QAA's website at [www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement)

#### **Title**

Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards

Progression and completion statistics

Learning support resources (including virtual learning environments)

Assessment of students

Work-based and placement learning, and employability

Programme monitoring arrangements

Arrangements for international students

Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

Recruitment and admission of students

External examiners and their reports

Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports

Institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education

Institutions' support for e-learning

Specialist institutions

Student representation and feedback

Academic guidance, support and supervision, and personal support and guidance

Staff support and development arrangements

Subject benchmark statements

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Programme specifications

Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degrees programmes

The adoption and use of learning outcomes

Validation and approval of new provision, and its periodic review

The self-evaluation document in institutional audit

The contribution of the student written submission to institutional audit

Institutions' intentions for enhancement

Series 2: concluding overview

## Appendix 4 - Methodology

The analysis of the institutional audit reports uses the headings set out in Annex H of the *Handbook for institutional audit: England (2002)* to subdivide the Summary, Main report and Findings sections of the 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 is taken from the report published on QAA's website and converted to plain text format. The resulting files are checked for accuracy and coded into sections following the template used to construct the institutional audit reports. In addition, the text of each report is tagged with information providing the date the report was published and some basic characteristics of the institution ('base data'). The reports are 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 are used to locate features of good practice and recommendations to the particular sections of the report to which they refer.

Individual *Outcomes...* papers are compiled by QAA staff and experienced institutional auditors. To assist in compiling the papers, reports produced by QSR N6® are made available to authors 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.