

Institutional audit: a guide for student representatives

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Institutional
audit

Introduction

This guide is for student representatives, including course reps and students' union (SU) officers, or their equivalent, in English higher education institutions. It will help you understand your role in institutional audit, which is the method of review being used by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency).

Timeline

1

Nine months before the audit visit

Preliminary visit

The Agency's assistant director, who coordinates the audit, visits the institution to meet institutional representatives and SU officers, or equivalent.

This is an opportunity for you to learn about what the process involves. The assistant director can answer questions about the audit and give guidance on the written submission, if you have decided to write one.

In order to get the most out of this meeting, you are advised to familiarise yourself with the *Handbook for institutional audit: England*.

2

18 weeks before the audit visit

Deadline for receipt of your written submission

The actual date of this deadline will be agreed at the preliminary visit.

3

Five weeks before the audit visit

Briefing visit

The audit team and assistant director visit the institution to get more information and to prepare the programme for the audit visit.

If the SU, or equivalent, have made a written submission they will be able to discuss this with the team and draw the team's attention to matters of interest.

4

Audit visit

The audit team visit the institution for five working days, the assistant director joins the team for the final part.

The audit team meet with course/programme representatives to discuss issues pertinent to the audit. These discussions might be at an institutional level, as part of a thematic enquiry, or at a discipline level in the discipline audit trails.

5

Two months after the visit

The Agency sends a draft report to the institution so it can check the accuracy of the factual content.

6

Six months after the audit visit

The final report is published.

What is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's role?

While higher education institutions themselves are responsible for ensuring they set appropriate academic standards and offer a good quality education, the Agency's responsibility is to safeguard the public interest in sound academic standards. The Agency achieves this by carrying out reviews of standards and quality in institutions.

What is meant by standards and quality?

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award (eg a degree). For similar awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK.

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students are managed to help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

In institutional audit, both academic standards and quality are reviewed.

What is an audit?

Institutional audit is carried out by a team of academics who review the institution's quality and standards. They use their expertise and knowledge of higher education to do this. They also review what the institution does against a set of nationally-agreed reference points, known as the Academic Infrastructure. This consists of:

- ▣ the *Code of practice*;
- ▣ the *framework for higher education qualifications in England*;
- ▣ subject benchmark statements;
- ▣ programme specifications.

Before the audit visit, the audit team look at the institution's self-evaluation document (SED). This is a document that the institution produces about itself, setting out a mixture of facts and figures and self-analysis.

The audit visit normally lasts five days, although each audit will be different. At the end of the audit the Agency publishes a report on the audit team's findings including the judgements they make.

How are the judgements reached?

To reach a judgement the audit team have to study the methods that the institution uses to manage the quality of the courses on offer and standard of the awards. They do this in different ways, including:

- ▣ reviewing the information the institution publishes about its own standards;
- ▣ reviewing institutional documents, such as policies and minutes of relevant meetings;
- ▣ asking questions of relevant staff;
- ▣ talking to students about their experiences;
- ▣ exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure (see *What is an audit?* for details).

The audit team also gather evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using audit trails. A trail may focus on a particular programme offered at that institution and is known as a discipline audit trail. Or, it may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality (a thematic enquiry).

What is our part in the audit?

Student representatives are invited to produce a written submission and to be involved in meetings throughout the process.

- The SU officers, or equivalent, are involved in the preliminary meeting, the briefing visit, and possibly the audit visit, and are responsible for coordinating any student submission.
- Student representatives at the subject or course level are invited to attend specified meetings during the audit, particularly in the discipline audit trails.
- Other relevant student groups, such as postgraduates, are invited to attend specified audit visit meetings, particularly at institutional level.

What are the benefits of taking part in institutional audit?

The information you give to the audit team will help give them a full picture of your institution and make sure that accurate and useful judgements and recommendations are made.

The purpose of audit is to assure the quality and standards of higher education, vital for future and present students. By representing students in audit, you are playing a part in making sure the academic life of your student members is a continually improving experience.

When will our institution be audited?

Between 2003 and 2005 all English institutions will have an audit. After that, visits will take place every six years.

What should we include in the written submission?

There is no formula for what the written submission should look like.

To help you think about what it might be useful to include, you could consider the following:

- How accurate is the information that the institution publishes about itself, such as prospectuses, programme descriptors and advertisements?
- Do students know what is expected of them in order to be successful?
- What is the student experience as a learner like, including teaching and learning opportunities, support received and access to learning facilities?
- Do students have a voice in the institution and is it listened to?

Don't worry if you don't have the information to cover all these points, anything you tell the audit team about these areas is useful.

Whatever you include, you must explain how you compiled the submission, who wrote it, and how far it has been shared and agreed with the student body as a whole. For example, if you have only included the views of full-time undergraduate students, you need to make this clear.

You should also make sure that the submission doesn't include personal grievances or discussion of the competency of individual members of staff.

For more detailed information you can look at the report structure and headings in Annex H of the *Handbook for institutional audit: England*. The *Handbook* is available on our web site at www.qaa.ac.uk/public/inst_audit_hbook/institutional_audit.htm

How much detail should we put into our submission?

You should always make reference to the evidence upon which the views expressed in the submission are based (for example, student surveys or feedback from student representatives). Giving evidence of your claims, such as reference to minutes of meetings, will help the audit team when they are making their judgements and writing their final report.

Which students' views should be represented in the submission?

The audit generally looks at matters across the institution as a whole, so the opinions of all student groups will be relevant, including, but not exclusively, those on franchised courses, NHS programmes and PGCEs. Your institution will provide you with information on the scope of the audit.

However, the scope of your submission is something you must decide, as long as you make it clear in your submission whose views are being represented.

Can our written submission be confidential?

If you want to, you have the opportunity to keep your submission confidential, subject to prevailing legislation.

Confidentiality will, however, restrict how your submission can be used. The audit team need to discuss issues, including those that you raise, with staff at your institution. It might be difficult to get useful information on something which you have included in your written submission if the audit team are not allowed to talk to staff about its contents. For this reason, the Agency strongly recommends that you share the contents of your written submission with your institution.

If you do want the submission to be confidential, you must make this clear on the front of the document.

What happens to the submission once it has been written?

The written submission should be sent to the Agency at least 4½ months before the audit visit. The final deadline will be agreed at the preliminary visit. The written submission will be read and considered by the audit team.

Is what we say going to make a difference?

Yes. The audit team consider all information given in the written submission and in meetings. The submission may not directly inform the final judgements that the audit team make, but it could inform the types of questions the team ask throughout the audit.

The audit team have to interpret all of the information they are given, including the information given in the written submission and by students in meetings.

This may lead the team to find out something really good about how the institution works, or might lead them to something that students are concerned about. For example, if students don't feel that their opinions are valued by the institution, or conversely if they think the institution really listens to them, this is likely to become apparent through talking to the students and through reading the written submission.

What happens if the student written submission conflicts with the institution's self-evaluation document?

The audit team use both documents to inform the lines of enquiry that they will make during the visit. Conflicting information might inform an area for further scrutiny.

What are the outcomes of audit?

After each audit, the Agency publishes a report. This consists of a summary, the findings of the audit and the main report. Audit does not result in any numerical 'scores'.

The audit team make judgements on:

- the confidence that can be placed in the institution's management of the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards;
- the reliability of the information it publishes on quality and standards.

The first judgement is an expression of confidence: either broad confidence, limited confidence or no confidence. The report also gives recommendations for action for the institution to take that might be 'essential', 'advisable' or 'desirable'.

Do we see the report before it is published?

No, the SU, or equivalent, do not see the report before it is published. The reason the report is sent to the institution before it is published is to check for accuracy of information. It would not be in anyone's interests for the report to be published with inaccurate information in it.

What happens if the audit team have limited or no confidence in our institution?

If the report expresses limited confidence, it is published along with a programme of follow-up action. The institution then has to let the Agency know what it is going to do about this plan, and give a progress report after three months. If there are still concerns after 18 months, the Agency will revisit.

Where a judgement of no confidence is given, the institution must also give quarterly progress reports on their action plan. If there are still concerns after 18 months, the Agency might bring forward the next audit.

The report might also recommend a full review in a discipline, using the method described in the *Handbook for academic review*.

Further information

All publications are available on the Agency's web site: www.qaa.ac.uk

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