

Key Audit Issues for Research Degree Programmes

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Outline

- Background
- Institutional audit, 2006-2011
- Experience so far
- Summary



Background

- Concerns have been ‘expressed to the funding bodies in their recent reviews of research policy and funding, including those from major sponsors of postgraduate education, about the quality and consistency of research training.’ *Hefce 2003/01*
- Two consultations, 2003/01 and 2003/23



Outcomes from consultations

- A single authoritative Code of Practice
- Special review of Research Degree Programmes, 2006
- ‘The special review of RDPs is a one-off exercise. Once the special review has been completed, all further consideration of the quality of provision for RDPs will be part of the institutional audit process which will be introduced in 2006-07. The reports produced as a result of this special review will form part of the evidence base for institutional audit.’
Operational description



Revised Section 1 of QAA CoP

Its introduction explains that the section 'is written in a firmer style than some other sections, especially the precepts, to give institutions clear guidance on the funding councils', research councils' and the Agency's [QAA's] expectations in respect of the management, quality and academic standards of research programmes'.



Institutional Audit, 2006-2011

- Judgements of confidence in soundness of institution's present and likely future management of:
 1. Academic standards of its awards
 2. Quality of learning opportunities for students
- Comment on how the institution ensures the accuracy and completeness of published information, and students' experiences of it

Recommendations for action by the institution

- I **essential** – currently putting quality and/or academic standards at risk – requires urgent corrective action
- I **advisable** – have the potential to put quality and/or academic standards at risk – require preventative or corrective action
- I **desirable** – have the potential to enhance quality of learning opportunities and/or further secure the academic standards of awards

Features of good practice

In the context of the institution

- | that make a particularly positive contribution to the institution's approach to the management of the security of academic standards and the quality of provision

Differences from previous audit method

- No DATs
- Sampling trails, based on periodic review
- Institutional arrangements for quality enhancement
- Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

Extracts from the *Handbook*

‘44 The revised institutional audit method requires audit teams to assess and report upon the extent to which institutional arrangements for securing the academic standards of awards and the quality of provision in postgraduate research degree programmes are in alignment with guidance given in the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes.*’

Guidance to institutions i

- ‘The section should outline the institution's approach to maintaining the academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes.’
- ‘It is an opportunity for the institution to reflect upon the effectiveness of this approach.’

Guidance to institutions ii

- ‘A particular point of reference for this section is the Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes, published by QAA.’
- ‘There should be references to documents that will describe the institution's approach to the management of postgraduate research programmes and awards and illustrate the way that the institution has appraised the effectiveness of its approach.’

Where the audit team starts

- The main reference point is Section 1 of the *Code of practice* – ‘written in a firmer style than some other sections, especially the precepts’
- Teams will assess and report on the extent to which institutional arrangements for securing academic standards of awards and quality of provision in p/g research degree programmes meet the expectations precepts of Section 1 of the *Code*
- The audit report will comment specifically on the institution’s arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of p/g research programmes

Information the team will use i

- The report of the Special review (not published) will be available to audit team – the report is the starting point for enquiries under this heading
- The audit team will wish to know how the institution has considered the report and action taken on any recommendations in the report
- Use of information – HEFCE completion rates – Issues paper 2007/29
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_29/ – team's interest is in how the institution uses the stats rather than the stats *per se*.

Information the team will use ii

- Institutional briefing paper
- Student Written Submission?
- Committee minutes and other documents
- Meetings with staff and students

Guidance to auditors—Annex C (Annex)

- ‘Subheadings for the annex might be:
 - Institutional arrangements and the research environment
 - Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students
 - Progress and review arrangements
 - Development of research and other skills
 - Feedback arrangements
 - The assessment of research students
 - Representations, complaints and appeals arrangements for research students’

It's not just about section 6! i

- 45 (cont) 'An audit team's formal comment on postgraduate research programmes will form the conclusion of a section of the institutional audit report, and will contribute to the overall confidence judgements.'
- Is practice consistent across the institution?
- How do you know?



It's not just about section 6! ii

- How is student progress monitored?
- How is management information used?
- What mechanisms are there for student feedback?
- What support is provided for PGR students who teach?

Don't forget...

- Not only might arrangements for PGR students contribute to judgements, they can contribute to features of good practice and also provide evidence of an institutional approach to quality enhancement.
- All of this applies, whether there are 4, or 4,000 PGR students

Experience so far

- How many audit reports?
- What kinds of institutions?
- Points from the recommendations
- Points from the features of gp
- Any messages?

- 27 institutions audited
- 12 small and/or specialist
- 2 had no PGR students
- Essentials 0
- Advisables 6
- Desirables 8
- Features of good practice 9

Advisables concerned...

- PGR provision outside the UK
- Training for supervisors
- Contact with supervisors
- Training for PGTAs
- Supervisor acting as internal examiner

Advisables concerned...cont'd

- Consistent operation of upgrading procedures
- Consistent local application of central procedures (supervision arrangements; MPhil-PhD progression)

Desirables concerned...

- Training for PGTAs (3)
- Roles, responsibilities, deliberative structures for managing PGR experience
- Facilitate PGR students' meeting
- Establish a personal tutor network
- Clarify entry regulations

FGPs concerned...

- Training for PGTAs (2)
- Quality of information for PGRs and supervisors
- Preparation for higher degrees
- Building community (2) and integration of students

FGPs concerned...cont'd

- Student representation channels
- Research skills course
- Support for students from central LTU
- Introduction of a logbook
- Annual progress meetings

Lessons for institutions?

- No systematic issues signalled
- No deficit of confidence is attached to PGR provision
- On the whole institutional processes aligned to QAA CoP

Lessons for institutions?...cont'd

- Training for PGTAs attracts attention
- Interest in PGR community and integration (environment)
- Interest in deliberative structures and processes

Lessons for institutions?...cont'd

- Recent debates around UG education
 - Academic standards
 - International students
 - Assessment practices
- Will the spotlight shift?

Summary

- How are you doing against section 1 of the QAA Code of Practice?
 - What did the Special Review report say?
 - What did you do with it?
- How is PGR provision monitored?
 - Graduate School? Senate/Academic Board?...
- How is good practice identified and disseminated?
Examples!
- How does PGR provision management contribute to enhancement?
- Don't treat PGR provision as something completely different—especially if it isn't!
- Evince a reflective approach!