

## **Mid-Cycle Follow-Up for Institutional Review: Report to the Quality Assurance Agency, April 2009**

1. This report follows the structure set out in the QAA's *Handbook for Institutional Review: Wales* for the mid-cycle follow-up to Institutional Review, addressing in turn the following headings:
  - actions taken to address the recommendations in the institutional review report;
  - actions taken to address the recommendations in the reports of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies since the review;
  - any major changes in the structure and organisation of the institution since the review;
  - any key strategic developments (for example, in learning and teaching, widening participation, research or information management) since the review;
  - where relevant, any development of collaborative arrangements with partner institutions or other organisations since the review;
  - the institution's intentions for the further development of quality assurance procedures and for the enhancement of learning opportunities.
  
2. The University of Wales, Aberystwyth's Institutional Review in 2005-06 was combined with an application for Taught and Research Degree Awarding Powers, as part of a restructuring of the Federal University of Wales. Following the approval of that application, we sought university title, and from September 2007 we have been known as Aberystwyth University. The University's Council decided in December 2008 to take the next logical step in our development: to award our own degrees. The Aberystwyth degree will be available to students graduating from July 2010 onwards. It is in this context that we report on developments since the Institutional Review.
  
3. We believe that the report demonstrates Aberystwyth University's ongoing commitment to the enhancement of our teaching and the student learning experience, and to the assurance of quality, in the light both of internal reflection on policies and practices and external developments, both within Wales and UK-wide. We have addressed the recommendations of the Institutional Review report. We have responded actively to the revision of elements of the QAA's academic infrastructure such as the Framework for HE Qualifications and sections of the Code of Practice. We work closely with the HEA in Wales and respond to initiatives from the Welsh Assembly Government and HEFCW, for instance in the development of the methodology for the next round of Institutional Reviews.

## **Section One: actions taken to address the recommendations in the institutional review report**

4. The report itself was extensively circulated within the University in order to generate awareness amongst staff generally. A link to the relevant QAA site from our own Quality Assurance web site enables access to the report from the University's staff web page. At a formal level, issues arising from the report have been discussed within the Senior Management Team, and at the Planning Group, the Academic Affairs Committee, Faculties and Departmental Boards. It has stimulated much interest and engendered considerable reflection on the way the University manages the quality and standards of its awards. We believe that we have engaged very constructively with the recommendations, which were as follows:

104.i "reviewing its current management of the quality agenda to enable it to adopt a more proactive stance" (paragraph 20)

5. The University has revised the terms of reference of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) to make explicit that post's responsibility for the management of quality and quality enhancement. We believed that the PVC's role as Chair of the Academic Affairs Committee, which is the body charged with developing the quality agenda, had already made this quite clear, but in view of the Review Team's recommendation we acknowledged the case for further clarity in this respect.
6. The PVC works closely with the Deans, Academic Secretary, the three Faculty Secretaries and staff in the Deans' Office to promote the quality agenda proactively across the University.

104.ii "reviewing, as a matter of urgency, the design of its degree schemes and the regulatory framework for awards with a view to satisfying itself that its students achieve all the planned learning outcomes associated with their intended award" (paragraph 52)

7. We undertook a major consultation exercise across all academic departments on this recommendation and have taken the following steps to address the concern of the Review Team:
8. All departments reviewed the learning outcomes of their taught programmes, in the context of relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, to ensure that those in their programme specifications are simple, concise and measurable. The more aspirational outcomes in some programme specifications were adapted in the light of this overriding principle.
9. In most cases departments have identified one or more core modules which students must pass to gain an award. For the most part these

are major dissertations, projects or key modules whose own learning outcomes encapsulate those of the target award. These will be designated 'Must Pass' modules for students entering Part 2 of undergraduate degrees in September 2009 or starting taught Master's degrees at that time. Our current modular regulations already permit this approach, but in practice few departments had chosen this route at the time of the Review.

10. In some cases, departments proposed an alternative approach, specifying a minimum number of credits to be passed from a range of modules. The University has worked with these departments over recent months to ensure that we adopt arrangements which can be operated effectively for the cohort entering Part 2 in September 2009.

104.iii "Keeping its assessment regulations under review, taking note of practice in the wider higher education sector" (paragraph 53)

11. The IR report notes in paragraph 44 that the University had amended its degree regulations for students entering Part 2 of the undergraduate degree from 2005-06. This followed a review of assessment regulations in other universities, as published on the web, where a wide range of practice was seen.
12. We looked at this matter once again in 2007-08 and concluded that the existence of a single, transparent system for the classification of degrees across all types of undergraduate degrees, levelised and non-levelised, of three, four and five year duration, offered a significant benefit which we would not wish to lose. The Review Team referred to students' incomplete understanding of the Cascade system for classifying undergraduate degrees. This does not tally with our experience, which is that students often understand it so well they sometimes appear to make tactical decisions to focus on assessments which can offer the maximum possible benefit for their degree class.
13. We do make available a Cascade Ready-Reckoner to final year students to use over the web on their Student Record Page and find that the vast majority of them do use it to plot their performance in individual modules against their target degree class.
14. One change to assessment conventions which was approved during the 2007-08 session is the introduction of a Merit classification in Taught Master's degree awards. We have discussed this on several occasions in the past, when we were operating to the University of Wales regulations, but there has either not been sufficient support within our Faculties at Aberystwyth or within the Federal University to take this forward. The issue was raised again by External Examiners within our Faculty of Social Sciences, where there was strong support. Although we are mindful of the findings of the Burgess review and the movement away from classifications at undergraduate level, it was noted that many other UK universities either offered, or intended to

offer, a Merit at taught Master's level, and therefore that we risked disadvantaging our students in the job market if we did not provide recognition for a level of achievement significantly higher than that required to pass the degree but below the level of Distinction. After discussions at the Faculties, the Academic Affairs Committee and Senate, during which the Guild of Students pressed strongly for the Merit, we have decided to make it available to new students starting from 2009-2010. The fact that we now have our own rules and regulations has made it easier to consider and implement this sort of change in response to developments across the sector.

15. During the current session we have also been reviewing our qualification descriptors to ensure that these are in line with the recently published revised QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as Welsh credit and qualification frameworks. We have already made changes to the descriptors for research degrees and a Working Party is assessing descriptors for taught study schemes.

104.iv "reviewing the access to the library in vacation periods, especially for postgraduate research students" (paragraph 72)

16. In order to strengthen two way channels of communication and dialogue with postgraduate students the University has undertaken the following actions:
17. Information Services has been granted membership of the Research Students' Consultative Committee (RSCC), established in 2006 to provide a forum for the discussion of matters of particular relevance to research postgraduates. Arrangements for extended Library opening hours have been a regular topic of discussion and action in RSCC meetings and were further discussed at a special meeting called by Information Services with Postgraduate Representatives on 5 September 2007 specifically to discuss Library opening times.
18. The Information Services Users' Committee, chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), discussed the outcome of that meeting with Postgraduate Representatives on 30 October 2007 and keeps this topic under regular review. Adjustments are made to opening hours as circumstances and resources allow, notably extending opening hours around examination periods. Questions on Library opening hours have been specifically included in the annual Information Services User Survey.
19. A newly refurbished 24/7 Learning Centre, providing postgraduate students with both IT and private and group study facilities, was opened in September 2007. Plans for similar additional facilities are under active consideration. At the same time, substantial new investment has recently been made in electronic journals and other e-resources, providing postgraduates and other students with 24 hour

access to nearly 11,000 titles and other key sources of research information. Any changes to library buildings and facilities that might occur as the University's Estate Strategy unfolds in coming years will be planned, if possible, with 24/7 access in mind.

*104.v "reviewing the accuracy of information provided to prospective and current students concerning the delivery of modules in the Welsh language with a view to ensuring that students have realistic expectations of the extent of Welsh medium provision available to them" (paragraph 99).*

20. A review of all Welsh medium modules offered by departments was conducted according to new HEFCW guidelines which state that all modules which offer a threshold of 2 credits through the medium of Welsh may be returned as Welsh medium provision and are eligible to receive Welsh Medium Premium. Every department provided information on the percentage of contact hours through the medium of Welsh on their modules, and this information is shown on the University's online module database, to which there is unrestricted access. Departments that offer modules which reach the minimum of 2 credits through the medium of Welsh, but which do not have Welsh medium titles or identifiers, have been encouraged to ensure that Welsh medium versions of these modules are approved by the relevant Faculty. This system ensures transparency as current students can see the exact percentage on offer through the medium of Welsh before enrolling on a particular module.
21. With regard to prospective students, the Prospectus and the Welsh Medium Studies handbook state clearly the categories in which Welsh medium courses, and courses which offer an element of Welsh, belong, according to the proportion of the degree scheme which is offered through the medium of Welsh. For 2011 entry, a Welsh Medium Prospectus will be prepared specifically for the Welsh Medium Market, in addition to the standard bilingual prospectus. The University has a Welsh Medium Provision Marketing Officer with specific responsibility for preparing marketing material in this area and for visiting schools and colleges to promote the provision. The Officer is fully briefed on all areas of Welsh medium provision in every academic department and is able to give accurate advice. All departmental handbooks provide clear descriptions of the provision offered through the medium of Welsh. The handbook *Astudio drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg* (Studying through the medium of Welsh) provides information on the departments which provide Welsh medium education and advice on bursaries and scholarships to study through the medium of Welsh in the University. This information is reinforced by the material published on the University's website.
22. A review of Welsh medium modules is scheduled for semester two of the 2008-09 session as part of the process of producing a revised

Welsh Language Scheme, in accordance with the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the requirements of the Welsh Language Board.

23. Aberystwyth University also contributes significantly to the development of Welsh medium provision at national level. We are represented at PVC level on the Higher Education Sector Group and sub-groups, which direct national developments on Welsh Medium Provision and contribute to the Welsh Assembly Government's Welsh Medium education strategy. At subject level, academic staff contribute to National Network Panels and two of our departments, International Politics and Mathematics and Physics, have been identified by HEFCW as lead providers of Welsh Medium education. As such they will receive funding over a three year period to develop Welsh medium provision within their subject areas.
24. The Department of International Politics has also been awarded a Welsh Medium Postgraduate Scholarship to run from September 2009. These awards are made on the understanding that the University will establish tutorships at the conclusion of the scholarship. Welsh medium tutors are currently being appointed in several departments which were previously awarded scholarships in 2005-06, such as Sport and Exercise Science.

105.i "To consider the means by which good practice from the new annual monitoring process can be drawn out and disseminated across the institution, and how matters of concern or institutional level issues arising from the process are identified and handled" (paragraph 25)

25. The Review Team attended, as part of their earliest engagements with the University in September 2005, the first complete round of Programme Monitoring in some departments, using guidelines refined the light of a pilot exercise in 2004. We have built on that early experience and have recently completed the fourth full exercise. Again we saw evidence of positive engagement across the University, with very useful departmental reports being presented to each Faculty and consolidated reports to Academic Affairs Committee. We believe that the monitoring process has bedded down well as a significant part of our quality assurance and enhancement systems, and that departments find the opportunity to reflect on their structures and schemes very profitable.
26. Examples of good practice, and areas in which action is required, which were identified at Faculty level, include:
  - The Department of Computer Science was trialling the use of the Qwizdom audience response system to address the problem of poor response rates from students on module evaluation questionnaires. This is a problem identified by other departments also.

- More rigorous monitoring of attendance and performance in continuous assessment was being undertaken in the Institute of Mathematics and Physics and the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences.
- The Faculty of Science has decided to discuss in detail at its May 2009 meeting how departments provide constructive feedback on examinations, an issue which arose in the monitoring exercise.
- Within the Arts Faculty, it was noted as good practice that there had been diversification of assessment methods, but that these nevertheless remained closely tied to module Learning Outcomes.
- Departments in Arts had strengthened Induction programmes with the aim of enhancing First Year Retention.
- The Arts Faculty was pleased to note increased attention to Equal Opportunities and Diversity in teaching, including the adoption of the 'teachability agenda' and the development of a Single Equality Scheme in one dept.
- Within the Faculty of Social Sciences it was noted that departments were continually seeking to improve the quality of the learning and teaching environments and existing degree schemes by reviewing portfolios and addressing market demand. In particular, there was increased recognition of links between departments and cognate subject areas which could be used to enhance undergraduate and postgraduate provision.

The University will continue to build on these foundations to improve the effectiveness of the exercise.

## **Section Two: actions taken to address the recommendations in the reports of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies since the review**

27. There have been no significant issues arising from accreditation reports from professional bodies, which are all reported to our Academic Affairs Committee. However, a June 2007 ESTYN report into ITT provision identified shortcomings which needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Following this report the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, working closely with Senior Management staff and liaising with the Academic Affairs Committee internally, and consulting externally with ESTYN and HEFCW, developed an action plan to tackle the concerns in the report prior to re-inspection in 2008. The outcome of the re-inspection was that HEFCW confirmed the accreditation of ITT provision at Aberystwyth, on the recommendation of ESTYN. A particularly important point was that the inspectors awarded a Grade 2 in Key Question 6 (how well do leaders and managers evaluate and improve quality and standards?). It was on this question that a Grade 4 had previously been awarded, leading to the re-inspection. We believe

that the problems identified by ESTYN have been thoroughly addressed.

### **Section Three: any major changes in the structure and organisation of the institution since the review**

28. As noted above, Aberystwyth now has university title and will begin to award its own degrees from July 2010. New entrants from September 2009 will be registered for Aberystwyth degrees, while currently registered students due to graduate from July 2010 onwards are being offered the option of an Aberystwyth award. The default position for these students will remain the University of Wales degree for which they initially registered.
29. Five other developments since 2005-06 merit particular mention. Two of these involve academic departments and three are in non-academic sections. During 2008, two new academic departments were created at Aberystwyth. In August 2008, the new Department of Psychology was established within the Faculty of Science. This was the culmination of a decision to develop Psychology as a subject area which began in semester two of 2006-07 when two modules were made available at level one. During that session a Joint Honours scheme in Psychology was approved for entrants from 2007-08. From 2009-10 this scheme will be available in combination with a wide range of other subjects from across the University including Marketing, Criminology, Education, English, Information Technology and Genetics and Human Health. Also from 2009-10, students will be able to register for Single Honours Psychology. This development reflects the increasing popularity of Psychology amongst prospective undergraduates and the employability of Psychology graduates.
30. A development on a significantly larger scale was the creation during 2008 of the new Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS). This resulted from the merger of two former University departments, the Institutes of Biological Sciences and Rural Sciences, with the nearby Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research (IGER), a research centre funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC). The merger creates the UK's largest group of scientists and support staff in its field. Initial investment of more than £50 million over five years from BBSRC, HEFCW and the Welsh Assembly government will include new research and teaching facilities both at IGER's Gogerddan site and the University's Penglais campus.
31. With more than 300 staff and an annual budget of more than £20 million, IBERS is a key department for the university. It is ideally placed to respond to the challenges of sustainable land use, climate change, and the security of food and water supplies: some of the major problems facing the world in the 21st century. It provides opportunities

for study for more than 1,000 students, including undergraduates on HNDs, Foundation and Honours degrees, and taught and research postgraduates. It is also intended to function as an enterprise centre whose expertise should benefit many Welsh enterprises across a whole range of sectors. This development has been enhanced further by the creation of a strategic alliance with Bangor University and underpins a number of Assembly Government policies in areas such as the environment, climate change and sustainable development. It is in keeping with the Assembly Government's One Wales strategy which entails joint working and inter-University agreements across Wales.

32. In March 2009 the University opened a new Student Welcome Centre on the Penglais Campus. The Centre brings together a range of staff and services which were previously located in different buildings and campuses: the Director of Student Support, the Student Financial Support Office, the Disabilities Officer, Income Services and the Medical Centre. Other services such as the learning support section of the Language and Learning Centre, and the Student Advice and Counselling Service, have been brought under the control of the Director of Student Support. These changes follow a review of student support services during 2005-06 under the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) which identified the need for a more cohesive welfare and support regime. Students should see the Centre as the focus of support activities and will be able to access the appropriate service for their individual needs.
33. Also housed in the Student Welcome Centre is the recently established section for International Recruitment and Collaboration, which is part of the Recruitment and Admissions Office. The establishment of this office reflects the importance of international collaborations and of attracting to Aberystwyth a diverse range of international students, which strengthen the University's academic profile and enrich the student experience. The language teaching function of the former Language and Learning Centre, with its British Council accredited English language courses, will be integrated within this new section, providing pathways and progression routes to full degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level.
34. In 2007, the University established a new Centre for the Development of Staff and Academic Practice (CDSAP) in place of the Staff Development Office. CDSAP discharges a range of functions including the delivery, in conjunction with the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, of the PGCTHE course, which is an HEA-accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in HE for new staff. CDSAP also provides an annual calendar of continuing professional development events for all staff, working closely with staff in other sections such as Information Services and Student Support Services. The Centre administers the annual Teaching Excellence Awards as well as funds to support Learning and Teaching enhancement, and is placing increasing emphasis on the dissemination of the good practice

developed by those in receipt of awards and funding. As part of this process, a Learning and Teaching Excellence and Enhancement Conference is being held in April 2009 and it is hoped to organise a similar event jointly with Bangor University later in the session.

**Section Four: any key strategic developments (for example, in learning and teaching, widening participation, research or information management) since the review**

35. In addition to developments described above, the following strategic developments merit attention.
36. The new International Recruitment and Collaboration Office is currently developing a five year International Strategy to run from 2009, based on the premise that the international work we engage in is central to the University's overall mission, goals and strategic direction. Among the key aims of the strategy will be to increase the number of international students and the development of TNE (trans-national education) and progression routes of study. Existing international partnerships will be developed, and new international collaborative partnerships established, to maximise international links for research, consultancy and knowledge partnerships. A further aim is the internationalisation of the University in curriculum design, in learning and teaching, and in the life of staff and students in general. The strategy will recognise the need to ensure a high level of student support and care for international students at all stages from enquiry through to application, nurturing, enrolment and in-session support. It will also develop a pro-active approach for maintaining contact with former international students or alumni and to develop ways in which these alumni can assist in the development of recruitment and collaborative initiatives for the University.
37. In 2008 the University approved a Retention Strategy which was developed by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) in consultation with the Deans, the Director of Student Support and Registry Staff, focusing initially on issues of progress from year one to year two. The strategy covers the common reasons for failure to progress such as financial problems, academic failure, and problems adjusting to university, and proposes action to address these including review of modules with high failure rates, monitoring of student progress and the assessment and feedback regime in the first year.
38. A new structure for the management of research has also been put in place during the current session. The University Research Committee will meet three times each year and will develop and monitor the implementation of the Research Strategy, assisted by a Research Task Group. Regular Faculty Research Forum meetings, chaired by the Deans who have been given an enhanced role in the promotion of research within their Faculties, and an annual university Forum for

Departmental Directors of Research, will help to ensure that departments have in place Research Strategies and Committees which are informed by clear guidance on university expectations regarding the organisation and management of research.

39. With regard to information management, we are introducing a new Contents Management System in a phased development intended to make it easier for academic and non-academic departments to maintain web sites and thus keep information up to date.

**Section Five: where relevant, any development of collaborative arrangements with partner institutions or other organisations since the review**

40. At the strategic level, in March 2009 Aberystwyth joined with Wales' four other major universities to announce their intention to act together, combining their strengths and talents to drive forward the knowledge economy in Wales. Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, Glamorgan and Swansea Universities represent over 70% of all students in Wales and more than 95% of the nation's research activity. With a combined annual turnover of approaching £1 billion, with a significant contribution from international sources, the big five are a substantial economic generator for Wales. Collaboration already takes place in fields including sustainable development, primary healthcare services and social recovery policies. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to partnership working and collaboration across the public sector in Wales and welcomed the announcement.
41. Various links have been developed with Bangor University, including the strategic alliance referred to above with IBERS. Another significant development, under the HEFCW Reconfiguration and Collaboration agenda, is that Aberystwyth and Bangor Universities have been working together to create a North and Mid Wales Centre for the provision of Initial Teacher Training.

**Section Six: the institution's intentions for the further development of quality assurance procedures and for the enhancement of learning opportunities**

42. Among various noteworthy enhancement activities, we would draw attention to the following:
43. We are currently developing an Employability Strategy to run over a five year period from 2009. This development recognises the importance of providing opportunities for students to develop skills and attributes which will enhance their employability. To do this the employability agenda needs to be seated at the heart of the University's strategic thinking and operational practices, and firmly

embedded within the student experience. Students need to be aware of how their employability is being developed through the curriculum, through work experience, through extra and co-curricular activities and through reflective practice, and they need to accept personal ownership of that development. Personal development planning will play a key role in this process, and we are currently making our PDP system (APPR) available online to assist this process.

44. On a related theme, Aberystwyth is one of 18 UK HEIs currently taking part in the Higher Education Achievement Report pilot exercise. This arises from the report of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group (the Burgess Group) which recommended introducing a single document, to be known as a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which would be the key vehicle for measuring and recording student achievement.
45. We are also taking part in the HEA-QAA project on quality enhancement and have contributed to the development of HEFCW's methodology for the next round of Institutional Reviews in Wales.
46. A major enhancement activity is the Aberystwyth GWELLA project, a follow-up to the E-Learning Benchmarking exercise carried out with HEA support in 2007-08. The GWELLA project, with HEFCW project funding, centres on Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through Technology. The guiding principle of our project is to develop a toolkit of technological options which will be available for staff to use where these are appropriate for their teaching. The project will seek to identify and disseminate good practice within Aberystwyth and from outside, so that academic staff will be able to evaluate the benefits of particular technologies for their own teaching. The use of E-assessment for formative and summative purposes will be a particular focus, as will the use of blogs, wikis and podcasting. It is intended that the student body will be closely consulted to ensure that their views and experiences are taken into account.
47. Aberystwyth University is working closely with the HEA in Wales on a range of enhancement activities. For example, we recently hosted an HEA Senior Managers conference on assessment and feedback. Through representation at the regular Wales Institutional Group (WIG) meetings, as well as on the PVC network, we have been involved in setting the HEA priorities for Wales and active in the various initiatives currently underway, including:
  - The First Year Student Experience
  - Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship
  - Research-Teaching Nexus
  - Assessment and Feedback
48. Aberystwyth maintained its excellent results in the National Student Survey in 2008, with the best scores in Wales as well as finishing in the

top ten in the UK for non single-subject institutions. The high level of satisfaction among our students is demonstrated also by our own internal survey of first year undergraduates and the Times Higher survey published in January 2009. Notwithstanding the positive messages coming from these surveys, we consider the NSS results carefully each session and seek to address areas where satisfaction levels can be improved. As with other institutions, we have looked carefully at the one area that attracts lower scores than all others: assessment and feedback. While we believe that results in this section of the survey will always tend to be lower than elsewhere, nevertheless we noted that some of our departments scored very highly here. In December 2008 we devoted one of our Learning and Teaching Forum meetings to sharing practice by asking representatives of three of our departments which had scored well or improved significantly to give presentations on their approach to feedback on student performance. Following that event, our Academic Affairs Committee has decided to develop a University Statement on Feedback which will set out the key principles to govern all feedback to students on assessed work.

## **Conclusion**

49. We believe that we have responded fully and effectively to the points raised in the Institutional Review Report, as well as continuing to develop our internal systems to ensure that quality and standards are safeguarded, and that the student learning experience is enhanced. In particular, we are developing a strong link between qualification for awards and the achievement of programme learning outcomes. We have outlined above many other areas we have developed in the last three years as part of our continuing commitment to enhancing learning opportunities and developing quality assurance systems. We recognise that improvements will continue to be required and that we must constantly review our systems in response to external developments as well as to issues raised by staff and students. We hope that this report demonstrates the progress we have made, and our willingness not only to react to events but also to be proactive in identifying areas in need of review and development.