



**QAA**



**University of Wales, Aberystwyth**

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APRIL 2007

Institutional review

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# **University of Wales, Aberystwyth**

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## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In Wales this process is known as institutional review. QAA operates similar but separate processes in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

## The purpose of institutional review

The aims of institutional review are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

## Judgements

Institutional review results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the **confidence** that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
- the **reliance** that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

These judgements are expressed as either **confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

## Nationally agreed standards

Institutional review uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, which include descriptions of different HE qualifications
- *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

## The review process

Institutional reviews are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of institutional review are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the review visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the review visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the review visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the review team five weeks before the review visit;
- the review visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the review team's judgements and findings 22 weeks after the review visit.

## **The evidence for the review**

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the review team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The review team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using 'thematic trails'. These trails may focus on how well institutional processes work at local level and across the institution as a whole.

Institutions are required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 04/05 *Information on quality and standards in higher education*, published by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

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## Summary

### Introduction

A review team visited the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (UWA) during the 2005-06 academic year to conduct an institutional review. The team comprised Professor A Jago, Professor T Kemp and Miss S Riches, reviewers, and Mr R A Platt, review secretary. The review was coordinated for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) by Dr I Ainsworth, Assistant Director, Reviews Group. The purpose of institutional review is to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of awards an institution offers. Institutional review leads to a judgement of confidence in the management of the quality and standards of the awards being offered by the institution.

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK.

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

In institutional review both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

This report provides a summary of the findings of the review team and highlights some matters that a future institutional review team may wish to pursue.

### Outcome of the review

As a result of its enquiries, the review team's view is that:

- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards.

### Features of good practice

The review team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the integration of financial and academic planning through the work of the Planning Group in the Planning Round
- the rigour of the scheme (programme) approval and departmental review processes
- the arrangements in place to support those students studying through distance-learning methods, particularly in the Department of Information Studies
- the thorough scrutiny of external examiners' reports and the clear allocation of responsibility for taking appropriate action in response
- the work of the Careers Advisory Service in operating both the Student Skills Competition as a means of gaining feedback from employers of the students' acquisition of transferable skills, and the Year in Employment Scheme, and
- the high level of support given by Welsh-speaking academics to students studying through the medium of Welsh.

### Recommendations for action

The review team advises the institution to:

- review its current management of the quality agenda to enable it to adopt a more proactive stance
- review, 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
- keep its assessment regulations under review, taking note of practice in the wider higher education sector
- review access to the library in vacation periods, especially for postgraduate research students, and

- review the accuracy of information provided to prospective and current students concerning the delivery of modules through the medium of Welsh with a view to ensuring that students have realistic expectations of the extent of Welsh-medium provision available to them.

The team further considers that it would be desirable for UWA 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.

### **External reference points**

To provide further evidence to support its findings the review team also investigated the use made by the UWA of the Academic Infrastructure which QAA has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The findings of the review suggest that the institution has engaged effectively with all elements of the Academic Infrastructure.

In due course the institutional review process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions as outlined in the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales' document W0405HE, *Teaching Quality Information (TQI) Requirements for Higher Education in Wales*. The review team noted that the institution had addressed these requirements and it was confident that UWA would continue to cooperate fully in providing such information as required.



## **Main report**

## Main report

### Introduction: the University of Wales, Aberystwyth

#### The institution and its mission

1 The University of Wales, Aberystwyth (Aberystwyth or UWA) was established as the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in 1872 and received its Royal Charter in 1889. It is a founder member of the federal University of Wales (the federal University or UW), established in 1893, and the degrees it awards are those of the UW. Prior to this, students at Aberystwyth studied for the external degree of the University of London. As a constituent institution of the UW, Aberystwyth enjoys significant autonomy in governance and management. UWA has four main sites in and around the town of Aberystwyth. UWA's main campus is on the outskirts of the town at Penglais and accommodates most of the institution's departments. Some of the institution's earlier buildings (the 'Old College') are in the main part of the town on the sea front. The School of Art is located in a building in the town centre whilst the Department of Information Studies and the Institute of Rural Sciences are located at the Llanbadarn campus.

2 At the end of the 2005-06 academic session UWA had 6,087 full-time and sandwich undergraduate students, 521 taught postgraduate students and 236 research postgraduate students; the corresponding numbers of part-time students were 2117, 758 and 54. The total number of overseas students within all categories was 648.

3 UWA is organised into the faculties of Arts; Social Sciences; and Science, which are subdivided into a total of 17 schools, departments or institutes. The proportion of full-time undergraduates is divided fairly evenly across the three faculties, although Arts has a much larger proportion of part-time undergraduate students and part-time taught master's students. UWA's support of the Welsh

language is a significant feature of the institution's provision; not only is there a series of degree programmes based around the Welsh language and the history of Wales but there is provision of Welsh-language versions of modules across the academic spectrum, and students have the choice of being examined in English or Welsh.

4 The School of Education and Lifelong Learning (SELL) offers certificates and a Diploma of Higher Education which are taught both at UWA, and in the community, by part-time tutors. In addition, the Departments of Information Studies and Law offer provision through distance-learning schemes. UWA has very limited collaborative provision and has never made this a significant part of its activity. Some collaborative links were terminated in 2005-06 and the sole residual element is franchised HNC/D provision at Coleg Sir Gâr near Carmarthen.

5 The present Vice-Chancellor (VC) is a relatively recent appointment (from 2004) but has held senior positions at UWA for some years. Recent changes have included a reconfiguration of the responsibilities of senior administrators, and the development of a close working relationship at research level with the University of Wales in the major funding of a research and enterprise partnership involving the two institutions.

6 UWA's aim, as defined in its Mission Statement, is '...to be a first-class teaching and research University, which seeks to play a full part in international research and, at the same time, to provide students with learning opportunities to the highest academic standards, a distinctive environment for study and a high quality of life. UWA responds to the needs of society for research and for skilled, educated and employable graduates. It is also conscious of its responsibility to the community in which it is based and places great value on collaboration with local institutions, as well as with its other contacts in Britain, Europe and the wider world'.

## Background information

7 The published information initially available for this review included the report of the previous quality audit (August 1998); reports of reviews by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) of provision at subject level since 2000; and information on the respective websites of the Higher Education Statistics Agency, Higher Education Research Opportunities (HERO), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and UWA.

8 UWA provided QAA with a critical self-analysis (CSA) and supporting documentation. The review team was also given access to the intranet. Additional information requested was provided promptly. UWA's Guild of Students provided a students' written submission (SWS) covering a wide range of aspects of the student experience at the institution. The team is grateful to the Guild for the SWS which was shared with UWA.

## Developments since the previous academic quality audit

9 The previous academic quality audit of UWA was undertaken in 1998. The report of that audit suggested that the institution might wish to consider the need to review the role of external examiners in examination boards at faculty level. UWA was also invited to consider the advisability of reviewing the clarity of the mechanisms used to terminate study programmes; the benefits of establishing a clear long-term timetable for departmental reviews and, more generally, examining the means used to monitor departmental and faculty level activities. It was also advised to review internal communication relating to academic matters; the mechanisms for developing and monitoring collaborative partnerships; student representation on key deliberative committees; the mechanisms used to respond to external examiners' comments; and the operation of external liaison groups and, more generally, its approach to securing external views on its processes and developments. Aberystwyth was further advised to review its approach to

plagiarism and means of ensuring that students received clear, comprehensive and consistent guidance; and the functioning of the Probationary and Appointments Committee in relation to the explicitness of expectations held of the performance of probationary academic staff.

10 Since the previous audit, UWA has introduced faculty external examiners to oversee the confirmation of final taught degree awards; and externality has been enhanced in course approval and review processes. Devolution of powers from the UW to Aberystwyth has also contributed to strengthened institutional oversight of departments by the faculties, and of both faculties and departments by a more proactive Academic Affairs Committee (AAC). UWA participated in subject review trialling in 1999 (Law), and in subject engagements in 2001-02 (Computer Science and Law). These engagements have contributed to the enhancement of practice, including a review of taught postgraduate learning outcomes in Computer Science and the introduction of a learning compact in Law.

## The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

### The institution's framework for managing quality and standards

11 Aberystwyth has used the federal University's broad regulatory framework for many years but, following the 2004 institutional review of UW and the subsequent devolution of functions from the federal University, Aberystwyth has assumed full responsibility for the academic standards of the awards it makes in the name of the UW, and for the quality assurance processes underpinning the standards of those awards. Aberystwyth has increasingly developed its own framework to assure the quality and standards of its awards. Within the framework set by the UW 'Enabling Regulations', and guided by *Code of practice for the assurance of academic standards in higher*

*education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, academic staff are made aware of the institution's quality agenda through a series of handbooks and codes of practice, all of which are made available through UWA's website.

12 Senate, chaired by the VC, is the academic authority of UWA but has delegated to AAC the specific remit for setting policy in relation to the quality and standards of awards and learning and teaching activities. AAC is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) with responsibility for learning and teaching and its membership comprises the faculty deans, other key members of the academic staff of each faculty, senior staff from key learning support services, and student representatives. AAC is described as having 'driven forward' UWA's quality and standards agenda, 'responding as appropriate to the various elements of QAA's Academic Infrastructure as they have appeared and been revised'. AAC also maintains oversight of UWA's collaborative provision.

13 UWA views AAC as 'both an engine of change and enhancement' and the Committee's wide-ranging role includes setting and reviewing the implementation of academic policies; responding to internal and external changes; approving new, restructured or withdrawn programmes; overseeing departmental reviews and monitoring departmental responses to review reports; monitoring faculty responses to external examiners' reports; and, up until the end of the 2004-05 academic year when the responsibility was transferred to the new Research Degrees Board (RDB), monitoring key issues arising from the reports of external examiners of research degrees. AAC oversees departmental and interim reviews, as well as the biennial quality audit questionnaire. By these means, the Committee is able to monitor how centrally agreed policies and procedures are being implemented at a local level, and review their effectiveness at faculty and departmental level, as well as identifying opportunities for enhancement.

14 Chaired by a PVC, UWA's Rules and Regulations Committee reports to Senate and provides the means by which UWA keeps its regulatory framework under review. The Committee's membership includes faculty deans, one additional representative from each faculty, the Director of Student Support Services and a student. Meeting twice a year to enable changes in regulations to be made for the forthcoming academic year, its terms of reference include providing advice and making recommendations to Senate on rules and regulations relating to students, and regulations for scholarships and prizes. Although UWA's website indicated that responsibility for examination arrangements and reports on complaints, appeals and unfair practice was to be transferred to AAC, the review team was informed that AAC's role in this context was centred on the annual monitoring of cases for report to Senate. The Rules and Regulations Committee has transferred responsibility for student pastoral matters to the Student Support Services Committee.

15 Responsibility for policy on postgraduate studentships and for institutional level monitoring of the quality and standards of research degrees resides with the recently introduced RDB, chaired by the PVC (Research). Research monitoring panels, operating at faculty level, monitor the progress of individual students and report to the RDB accordingly. The Director of Postgraduate Studies is responsible for organising the provision of postgraduate training (see paragraph 73 below) and is a member of RDB. The RDB reports to Senate and to AAC.

16 As indicated in paragraph 3 above, a special feature of Aberystwyth is its provision of Welsh medium studies. The School of Welsh Medium Studies (SWMS) comprises the heads of all departments which offer degree programmes or substantial higher education provision through the medium of Welsh, all members of staff involved in delivering this provision, and student representatives. While the faculties are responsible for the quality aspects of all provision, SWMS reports to the

faculties on quality and standards issues in the context of its primary role in developing and coordinating Welsh medium provision; and considers and makes recommendations to Senate regarding the development of Welsh language provision in all its aspects. Welsh and English medium provision are approved and monitored in the same way. Arrangements are made for translation of Welsh language material presented for scrutiny outside the proposing department, for the benefit of non-Welsh speaking staff.

17 The faculties play a key role in the maintenance of quality and standards. Faculty executive committees, chaired by the deans, are responsible, inter alia, for approving new or revised modules; receiving departmental annual monitoring reports; monitoring external examiners' reports; reviewing departmental quality audit questionnaires; and considering proposals for new, restructured or withdrawn degree programmes.

18 The CSA indicated that deans were integral to the management of quality and standards, exercising an important leadership function with power to take executive action, subject to reporting to the PVCs or VC, as appropriate. They also present the cases for promotion of academic staff within their faculty at Staffing Committee meetings which are augmented to include deans as full members of the Committee when promotions are considered. Supported by faculty secretaries (senior administrative staff) and by staff in the Deans' Office, the deans work as a team and liaise through deans' meetings. They do not have budgetary responsibilities for their faculties, nor are they members of UWA's Senior Management Team (SMT). The allocation of resources, particularly that of academic staffing, is made through annual Planning Round meetings in which departments, through their heads, set out their academic strategy to the SMT.

19 The review team noted that UWA has clear procedures for discontinuing schemes, which involve departments submitting proposals for the withdrawal of modules and schemes for

scrutiny by the relevant faculty. The SWMS must also be consulted if a department proposes withdrawing Welsh medium provision. AAC is responsible for approving the withdrawal of study schemes and the arrangements for phasing them out; a responsibility which it takes very seriously, especially in relation to safeguarding the interests of students.

20 UWA has resisted the establishment of a dedicated quality unit or office, believing that the central roles of the deans and the PVCs, with administrative support, obviate the need for such an additional layer. The review team perceived the locus of responsibility for academic quality at PVC level to be implicit, rather than explicit, and considered that UWA's approach might lead to a rather reactive stance to quality issues. For example, it noted that annual monitoring had only recently been introduced, and that only after the 2004 publication of the revised *Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* of the QAA Code of practice did UWA institute a means of gaining an institutional overview of postgraduate matters, through creating the RDB, despite having a long and distinguished record in postgraduate activity. Consequently, the team formed the view that it would be advisable for UWA to review its current management of the quality agenda to enable it to adopt a more proactive stance.

21 The review team concluded that the committee structure for maintaining the quality and standards of the awards of UWA is appropriate, and that the AAC is indeed fulfilling the role ascribed to it. The team was also able to confirm the significant role of the deans in the management of quality and standards at UWA, and in terms of the academic leadership they provided to their faculties. The team further considered that the close integration of academic need and resource allocation, facilitated through the operation of the Planning Round, was a feature of good practice.



## **Internal approval, monitoring and review processes**

### **Programme approval**

22 The approval of new or radically-revised taught degree programmes involves the initial submission by departments of a completed pro forma for which guidance is provided. The pro forma requires essential information, including the level of fit with both a department's learning and teaching strategy, and its research activity; the link to subject benchmark statements; the recruitment potential and entry requirements; the assessment regime to achieve intended learning outcomes; the demands made of learners, and any special features; external consultation and reference points; and resource requirements. The pro forma is supplemented by a full set of programme specifications and is signed by the Head of Department concerned, the Director of Information Services, and by the Timetable Officer.

23 Scrutiny of a proposal is undertaken by a panel, comprising the relevant faculty dean and sub-dean; a representative of another department from within the faculty concerned; and, since September 2005, a UWA-appointed external assessor (prior to this time, UW appointed the external representative). The panel meets departmental representatives who are invited to present the case for a new programme and respond to questions from the panel which makes a recommendation to AAC for approval. The panel also gives feedback to the departmental representatives. The review team confirmed the significant role of externals involved in approval events, and concluded that the procedures for programme approval are robust and constitute a feature of good practice.

### **Annual monitoring**

24 Annual monitoring is a relatively new process at UWA. Incorporating a review of individual module components, the process involves the completion of a comprehensive pro forma which refers to action taken since the last monitoring exercise; reflection and comment on a range of 'study issues', including student progression, assessment methods,

student support and guidance, equal opportunities, staff development and student careers; evaluation and feedback (results of student questionnaires, comments from staff-student consultative committees, and staff feedback); reports from external examiners; external accreditation reports; other external input; development plans; and programme specifications. Full guidance on the process is given on UWA's public website. The completed form, signed by the appropriate head of department, is forwarded to the relevant faculty for scrutiny and AAC monitors the process at institutional level.

25 The process is too recent for it to have been refined but the review team considered the pro forma to be fit for purpose, and observed that there had been lively and thoughtful discussion of the process at departmental level. The team considered, that UWA will no doubt wish to reflect on the annual monitoring process and continue to monitor the effectiveness of this new process across the institution. In particular, the team was of the view that it would be desirable for UWA to consider how good practice can be drawn out and disseminated across the institution, and how matters of concern or institutional level issues are identified and handled.

### **Periodic review**

26 Departmental review (as periodic review is known at UWA) has long been one of the most important features of the institution's quality strategy. It currently operates under the aegis of AAC on a six-year cycle (although this time frame is under review). Departmental reviews are undertaken by panels chaired by a PVC (usually the Chair of AAC), consisting of two deans (including the dean of the faculty within which a department being reviewed is located) and an external assessor. UWA has recently phased in a refined departmental review system to address better the expectations of the relevant section of QAA's *Code of practice* relating to periodic programme review. The new departmental review process is intended to provide 'a much greater focus on the study

schemes offered by the department, though still within the context of a review of learning and teaching activities'.

27 Departmental review panels consider self-evaluation documents provided by departments using UWA guidelines, together with performance data supplied centrally. Review documentation includes copies of external examiners' reports for the relevant period of coverage together with departmental responses. Meetings are then held with the relevant head of department and various groups of staff and students, including research students. Where appropriate, a tour of facilities is also arranged. Panels then form a view of the academic well-being of the department in question and give feedback to the relevant head of department. They then produce reports for AAC stating their conclusions and recommendations for action. While the main focus of the panels is on quality and standards issues, they can also comment on wider issues such as departmental resourcing. UWA cited, and the review team was able to see, a number of instances of departmental reviews leading to improved departmental quality and standards procedures. Departmental review is supplemented by internal interim reviews in which members of AAC explore a department's engagement with Aberystwyth's quality and standards policies and procedures with the Head of Department and Director of Teaching.

28 The review team concluded that the departmental review process, which was inclusive of all staff and groups of students, was rigorous, and benefited from the effective use made of external assessors in the process.

### **External participation in internal approval, monitoring and review processes**

29 As indicated in paragraphs 22 and 26 above, UWA's programme approval and departmental review processes require external participation. Under previous arrangements, the federal University appointed the externals for programme approval events. Although the

approval of new modules does not require external input, external examiners have the opportunity to comment on their merit. Furthermore, module approval requires an assessment by senior UWA academics external to the proposing department, in addition to approval by the appropriate faculty executive committee.

30 The review team confirmed the key role played by the external members in the internal processes of UWA. It also noted that UWA's annual monitoring requirements, which include consideration of external examiners' reports, and of external accreditation reports where appropriate, are being met. The team concluded that the level of externality in UWA's internal approval, monitoring and review processes was strong, giving confidence in the standards of UWA's awards.

### **Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies**

31 As indicated in paragraph 10 above, UWA has been involved in two subject engagement activities since the previous audit of 1998, leading to enhancements in both subject areas involved. A number of the institution's degree programmes are accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs) such as The Law Society, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (for degrees in the Department of Information and Library Studies, including distance-learning schemes), the Institute of Physics, the British Computer Society, the Association of MBAs, and the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales (ESTYN) (for initial teacher training in Wales). In order to ensure consistency of practice and to enhance central oversight of the process, AAC has recently reviewed and revised the procedures for coordinating and managing accreditation exercises including scrutiny of PSRB reports. The review team considered that the procedures for managing PSRB visits, and responding to PSRB reports, had been significantly improved subsequent to this review.

### **Student representation at local and institutional level**

32 Students are represented at departmental level through staff-student consultative committees (SSCCs). The Guild of Students is involved through its representation on Senate and Council and all of their main committees, except the Staffing Committee and the Planning and Resources Committee. The Research Students Consultative Committee (RSCC) has recently been established with a membership of one student representative per department; one student representative from each of the following categories: Postgraduate Association; part-time students; international students; and Welsh medium students; and two representatives of academic staff from each faculty. The RDB considers reports of, and recommendations from, RSCC meetings.

33 The impression gained by the review team from its meetings with different student constituencies, including representatives of the Guild of Students was of a generally high level of satisfaction with the student experience at UWA, although the team noted that students considered that there was scope for improvement in the availability of Welsh medium modules and in terms of the library and accommodation related issues they raised. The students considered that they have the capacity to voice concerns where these were due and they expressed positive views about student representation.

34 Practice at research postgraduate level varied between departments with some having a specific postgraduate SSCC, some having a postgraduate research representative on a general SSCC, and others using a postgraduate student forum approach. Given the variability in the size of the postgraduate research student populations in different departments, the review team considered that the different approaches adopted were appropriate and fit for purpose.

35 The review team noted the important consultative role played by the Guild of Students in UWA's efforts, through its task group in June 2006, to mitigate the effects of the 'industrial

action short of a strike' upon the examination timetabling and marking of examined and assessed work. The team concluded that the system of student representation at UWA appeared to be working well.

### **Assurance of the quality of teaching delivered collaboratively or through distributed and distance-learning methods**

36 As mentioned in paragraph 4 above, UWA's collaborative provision is confined to a franchised HNC/D programme delivered at Coleg Sir Gâr. The quality assurance of this programme is achieved in the same way as programmes delivered on the UWA campus, and is monitored by the AAC. Students on these programmes have access to the learning resources at UWA. In addition, the review team noted that the progress of those students studying modules and programmes leading to certificates or the Diploma of Higher Education offered by SELL in the community, is reviewed by relevant SELL boards and committees.

37 UWA's distance-learning activity is confined to Information Studies and Law. The Department of Information Studies is a major provider of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes aimed at practitioners in information and library services, records management and archive administration. Approximately 80 per cent of its students study through distance-learning methods. The Department of Law offers a single distance-learning programme, the LL.M in Environmental Law and Management, which has modest recruitment. UWA applies the same quality procedures to on and off-campus provision, although a 'distance learning' version of the quality audit questionnaire (see paragraph 13 above) has been developed.

38 The review team considered that the arrangements for managing these various programmes are appropriate and satisfactory. It formed the view that the distance-learning programmes were resourced appropriately, and that students were well-supported by enthusiastic and dedicated staff who



demonstrated a good understanding of the quality issues inherent in this mode of delivery. The team considered that the distance-learning arrangements adopted by the Department of Information Studies, in particular, constituted a feature of good practice.

## **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards**

### **External examiners and their reports**

39 From 2005-06, as part of the federal University's devolution of responsibility for quality and standards, Aberystwyth has assumed responsibility for the appointment of external examiners. Faculty deans are responsible for ensuring that departmental nominations meet the institution's criteria for appointment, which includes the requirement that external examiners are of 'sufficient seniority to command respect in the subject' with due regard being given to their seniority and experience, demonstrable externality, length of office, and the number of simultaneous examinations held.

40 All external examiners are issued with a pack of common materials and the Deans' Office organises an induction day for new appointees or individuals who have been unable to attend in previous years. One aspect of the induction is to explain the principles of, and rationale for, the 'Cascade' system for degree classification which many students (and some external examiners) have found difficult to grasp. UWA operates a fully modular system, and the external examiners are involved in scrutinising module marks which contribute to final awards.

41 Each faculty has its own examination board and, since 1999-2000, an associated faculty external examiner whose role is to assure consistency across a faculty before degree classes are confirmed. Faculty external examiners usually have prior experience as departmental externals and attend final degree

examination boards, at which awards are made. Whilst the faculty external examiner role has contributed to UWA's arrangements for ensuring consistency of treatment and equity for students within a faculty, the review team considered that UWA might consider how it could enable faculty external examiners to contribute to cross-faculty consistency. The team noted, however, that other methods are in place to ensure consistency of treatment across the institution, including institutional conventions on the treatment of borderline cases; guidelines on the treatment of special cases; the Deans' Special Cases meeting; the presence of the Academic Secretary and Registry staff at all faculty examination boards; the provision of analyses of decision making; and deans' reports to AAC on assessment issues arising from faculty examination boards.

42 The CSA indicated that external examiners' reports confirm consistently that standards of marking are in line with those elsewhere in the United Kingdom. This was borne out by the review team's reading of a number of reports. The reports themselves are structured to reflect QAA's *Code of practice* and Teaching Quality Information (TQI) requirements. The VC reads the external examiners' reports, which are also considered in detail by departments and faculties. The review team noted the full discussion of external examiners' reports, and responses to them, at departmental learning and teaching committees, and at faculty executive committee meetings. Departments are required to respond directly to their external examiners and to report their actions and response to their faculty, which monitors responses and, in turn, reports to AAC. Where items of particular concern are identified, the Chair of AAC or the relevant faculty dean may write directly to the external examiner who raised them. After considering the reports from the faculties, AAC issues a consolidated statement which is reported to Senate on an annual basis, circulated to all externals, and forwarded to the federal University for information and report.

43 UWA operates a fully modular system and, accordingly, there are two tiers to the examination board process for undergraduate degrees. Aberystwyth regards the two-tier system, introduced following a recommendation arising from the 1998 QAA audit, as very successful and extended this, in 2004-05, to include taught master's programmes. External examiners participate in all departmental examination boards where module marks contributing to final awards are agreed.

44 The review team considered that the procedures for the appointment, induction and involvement of external examiners were appropriate. External examiners' reports and a consolidated statement read by the team indicated that the processes of responding to external examiners' reports at departmental and institutional level, where relevant, were sound. The team noted that some issues, for example, the 'Cascade' scheme and the volume of failed credits permitted, attracted external examiner comment on a perennial basis. It was aware, however, that issues raised by external examiners were debated within UWA, often at length, and served to inform future policy development. The team concluded that the thorough scrutiny of external examiners' reports and the clear allocation of responsibility for taking appropriate action in response constituted a feature of good practice.

### **Student admission and the use made of progression and completion statistics**

45 Oversight of achievements and trends in admission, progression and completion is maintained through annual sets of data sheets, circulated to all departments and UWA officers. These contain information on student full-time equivalents at all levels for all domiciles; costs per student; student/staff ratios; average GCE A-Level points scores for undergraduate entrants; withdrawal rates by year of programme; failures; and changes of degree scheme. They also give data on research income by department on a rolling four-year basis. UWA indicated that the data sheets

served a variety of purposes, while noting that they might usefully be further enhanced.

46 The review team was told that these data enable the institution to identify departments with potential problem areas in terms of student performance or the quality of the student experience. The team confirmed this to be the case and also noted the role of the data in the institution's academic planning and in helping departments to improve their performance. UWA acknowledges that the current information in the data sheets does not provide the degree of granularity indicated in QAA's *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design approval, monitoring and review* but the Academic Office and Management Information Systems (MIS) are seeking to develop programme-specific data from which overall departmental data can be derived.

47 Departments are required to reflect on their admissions policies and student progression and attainment as part of the annual monitoring process, and the completed pro formas are reviewed at faculty level. A statement on admissions policy is also a required component of any new or revised degree scheme. Performance in student recruitment is an element of the annual departmental submission of their strategic plans as part of the annual Planning Round which allocates resources for the following academic year.

48 The review team was able to confirm that the statistical information provided is widely and effectively used at departmental, faculty and institutional levels. UWA's data sheets, prepared centrally by the Academic Registry and distributed to academic departments and senior officers, contain analyses of academic failures by department and faculty. These analyses are used, alongside other indicators to identify weaknesses or quality concerns. The institution recognises the need to provide programme level information which would enable it to pinpoint more accurately such concerns, and it was actively seeking solutions to this issue at the time of the review. During the review period, the institution identified its own concerns about

the use of N (No-resit) indicators at part one of a programme of study, and the effect that this practice may have on retention. There was evidence of an active dialogue between faculties and AAC on the matter.

### **Assessment practice and procedures**

49 The standards of UWA's taught awards are 'underwritten and verified by the programme development and approval process..., the Departmental Review Process, and the external examiner system', and in the case of research awards 'by the UWA Code of Practice for Research Postgraduates, externally moderated research training, compliance with the QAA Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Programmes, the Faculty monitoring and review process and by external involvement in the examining process'. The standards of UWA's awards have been confirmed by external subject review, QAA developmental engagements, PSRB accreditation exercises and, on an ongoing basis, by its external examiners.

50 Policies for assuring the standards of assessment of students on taught schemes have been formulated in the light of the relevant section of the QAA *Code of practice* and are set out in the Quality Handbook for Staff. These policies serve two major purposes, namely, to assure and confirm the standard of the marks awarded; and to demonstrate to students that marking practices are objective and free from bias. Departments are required to keep their marking standards under review and to ensure that relevant staff are inducted into departmental marking practices. This is monitored by the biennial quality audit questionnaire and through the departmental and interim review processes. The reliability and validity of assessment methods is monitored by module review; annual programme monitoring; quality audit questionnaires; interim reviews; and departmental reviews with external examiners' reports featuring prominently in these processes.

51 Departments are encouraged to diversify their assessment methods to link them more closely to learning outcomes and this is

addressed explicitly in module and scheme approval and review documentation. Although all learning outcomes are assessed, there is no requirement for skills components to be formally assessed. Following a review by an internal working party in 2004-05, which included consideration of practice elsewhere in the sector, UWA amended its regulations for students entering part two of the undergraduate degree from 2005-06 to require students to pass two thirds of credits at the level of the award, namely 80 out of 120 level 3 credits in a 'levelised' scheme. The impact of the amended regulations has yet to be determined, but UWA is keeping the matter under review.

52 The review team noted that the amount of credit which students are permitted to fail and still qualify for an award has attracted external comment in that, in the absence of institutional convention requiring minimum threshold marks for compensation or condonement purposes, or the designation of core modules which must be passed, some students may graduate without having demonstrated the complete achievement of programme learning outcomes. Consequently, while noting UWA's intentions to review the situation, the team considers it advisable that UWA re-examines this particular matter with some urgency.

53 Students are made aware of UWA's policies through 'The Students' Examination Handbook' which indicates that '(departmental) procedures will include at the very least sampling by a second internal marker of a minimum percentage, agreed in consultation with the external examiner, of the work being assessed, with particular emphasis on fail and borderline marks. In many cases, departments will double mark all significant assessment elements'. However, UWA acknowledges that increased student numbers and the volume of assessed work now counting towards degree classification at undergraduate level 'makes it no longer possible to sustain in full the practice of blind double marking hitherto followed by several departments'. As indicated previously (see paragraph 44 above), the 'Cascade Scheme' has attracted some external examiner

comment. The SWS and comments made by students who met the review team also suggested that students fail to understand the scheme despite the publicity it receives. Consequently, the team considered that it would be advisable for UWA to keep its assessment regulations under review, taking note of practice in the wider higher education sector.

54 The examination of research theses requires the appointment of a minimum of one external examiner whose report is considered by RDB. Departmental or centrally based staff follow up issues of concern. Where issues of an institutional nature arise, recommendations are forwarded to AAC. The training programme for research students, which has received Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) recognition, is also subject to scrutiny by an external examiner.

55 The review team found that interactions between UWA staff and external examiners at departmental and faculty examination boards were open and constructive, with a genuine willingness of UWA staff to consider and reflect on external comment. The team formed the view that examination boards operated effectively with the business of the boards being conducted in a fair manner, and that Aberystwyth's procedures for securing the standards of the awards were sound.

## **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning**

### **Feedback from students, graduates and employers**

56 Formal feedback from undergraduate students is obtained in a variety of ways. Module feedback through student questionnaires is an integral part of module delivery and completed analyses of feedback forms are considered at learning and teaching committees within departments; these considerations form part of the annual monitoring of taught programmes (see paragraph 24 above). Feedback on modules

and programmes, as well as other aspects of the student experience, is obtained from the deliberations of SSCCs or graduate forums. Meetings with groups of students to solicit their views are a key feature of departmental review (see paragraph 27 above) and the review team noted that students took full opportunity to make their views known.

57 Feedback on the performance of academic services such as the Department for Information Services (IS) is sought through an annual survey and the review team noted that, in 2006, over 650 students had responded to a very detailed IS satisfaction survey. The Student Support Services Committee monitors the effectiveness of UWA's arrangements for supporting students and includes representatives from the Guild of Students. There is also an institution-wide satisfaction survey for all full-time first-year students which attracts a high return rate. UWA gains further feedback from the National Student Survey enabling it to compare its performance against that of other higher education institutions. While Aberystwyth achieved a generally very positive outcome, the team noted that the few exceptions made for some lively discussion at Senate. Feedback is also obtained through student representation at a wide range of institutional-level committees (see paragraph 32 above) and the team noted action taken as a result of feedback received.

58 Employers are directly involved with departments by several means. UWA regards the Student Skills Competition run by the Careers Advisory Service as being particularly effective. Departmental teams which reach the finals are twinned with an employer who guides the students in understanding the skills requirements of graduate recruiters, and in articulating and marketing the competencies acquired during the students' time at UWA. The review team noted that there was professional feedback on student performance from schools where students were involved in school practice while on teacher training programmes.

59 The review team concluded that students have a range of means to provide feedback on



their experience at UWA. The team viewed the Student Skills Competition as an example of good practice in obtaining feedback from employers on the acquisition of students' transferable skills.

**The means by which the quality of teaching staff is assured: appointment, appraisal and reward**

60 UWA has a rigorous recruitment and selection process in place to ensure that candidates with appropriate qualifications, experience and/or potential are appointed to academic posts. The appointments process has recently been reviewed and improved through, for example, issuing clear guidance to line managers on the production of job and person specifications; working with departments in setting up appointments panels; providing training for members of such panels; and reviewing the outcomes of the process. In addition, material has been developed to promote the advantages of working at UWA for applicants. UWA acknowledges that its location is a strong selling point but recognises that its location may also bring disadvantages for some prospective candidates.

61 The institution's staff appraisal scheme for teaching and research staff was described as being in abeyance, although its re-introduction is being considered as part of a new performance review process which is to be introduced as part of the National Framework Agreement. Although changes were in train, many departments were continuing with the current system in a 'developmental way'. A programme of leadership and management development is given to all heads of department and section heads. Offered on an annual basis, in collaboration with the University of Wales, Bangor, it involves a two-day residential seminar and programme participants are linked to an internal mentor with appropriate experience.

62 UWA has recently reviewed its approach to staffing matters, leading to the current human resources strategy and, in September

2005, a PVC was given overall responsibility for staffing related matters to enable a strategic overview of staffing issues to be taken. As a consequence of these changes, some new staffing policies and procedures have been introduced and others strengthened. The Staffing Committee, which is chaired by the VC, deals with a wide range of staffing matters, including promotion. Academic promotion opportunities are offered on an annual basis and follow a highly structured procedure. Clear guidance is given to applicants on the criteria to be applied which include performance in relation to teaching, research and administration, and how to improve their applications. Faculty deans have a key role in presenting the case for promotion from lecturer to senior lecturer at institutional committee level.

63 The review team considered that the procedures in place for the recruitment, appointment, appraisal and reward of teaching staff were appropriate, while noting that the introduction of the performance review process is in gestation.

**The means by which the quality of teaching staff is assured: staff support and development**

64 UWA acknowledges that the enhancement of learning and teaching depends on valuing and supporting academic staff and encouraging innovative practice. It achieves this by sharing good practice, supporting initiatives and recognising and rewarding excellence by, for example, the annual teaching award scheme, which is in its fifth year of operation. Recently, this has been complemented by the creation of a comparable scheme for postgraduate teaching assistants. Staff are encouraged to be members of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and UWA supports those taking initial membership. Thus far, about 25 per cent of staff are HEA members. Postgraduates involved in teaching receive induction and support from a mentor designated by the appropriate department.

65 Although staff are supported in their development needs, UWA acknowledges that a

more strategic approach to staff development is needed. Revisions to the terms of reference and membership of the Staff Development Committee (SDC), a subcommittee of the Staffing Committee, have been accepted for implementation in the new academic year, with a view to making it a more effective vehicle for developing and reviewing the strategy.

66 UWA recognises that there is scope for improvement in addressing a range of staff development requirements, including leadership and management development; professional development for new staff; and continuing professional development for academic staff. Other areas where improvements might be effected included staff development and the dissemination of good practice in relation to learning and teaching, the development of the teaching capacity through the medium of Welsh; training for postgraduate teaching assistants; specific support staff training staff; and training in issues relating to legal compliance. The human resources agenda also included the monitoring of staff development activity; and the identification of effective means of reviewing staff development needs and the extent to which they are being met.

67 In order to deliver on these requirements, staff development is to be considered at the level of the institution, department, and individual. UWA will then decide whether it needs a separate staff development unit (SDU), as has been the case hitherto. Whilst the SDU has had a major role in delivering programmes for new staff, take-up of its other provision has been more 'patchy' with much staff development taking place within departments, as in the case of the training and induction of staff in key departmental roles, for which some support is also offered by the Academic Registry. It has been accepted, however, that AAC should consider whether departments should be provided with more comprehensive guidelines and offered training.

68 The review team noted that UWA is carrying out a full review of its staff development strategy in addition to the terms

of reference of the committee responsible for overseeing its implementation and subsequent monitoring. While it would be premature to offer an opinion on the merits of the developing arrangements, the team was reassured that UWA had perceived the need for a radical rethinking in this important area.

### **Learning support resources**

69 UWA regards its information services provision as a significant strength. The Department of Information Services (IS), acting as a single organisational focus, delivers library and academic computing support for students in both English and Welsh. The general direction of service development is defined in the IS Strategic Plan which takes account of institutional priorities. The Department of IS communicates information about its facilities to students using guides, newsletters and its web page which is linked to an enquiry and 'Frequently Asked Questions' section. New students experience an induction programme supplemented by additional courses to promote information and communications technology (ICT) literacy. Considerable investment has been made in ICT hardware provision to give a resource highly valued by the student body as evidenced by satisfaction surveys, and in review team meetings with students.

70 UWA's library facilities are notably augmented by the location, adjacent to the Penglais campus, of the collection of the National Library of Wales, a copyright library, to which staff and students have reader, but not borrower, access. This additional facility was highlighted as invaluable by students who met the review team. In addition to library services, the Department of IS is responsible for maintaining and developing Aberystwyth's Learning and Teaching On-line (ALTO) services. Learning resources are increasingly being made available through UWA's virtual learning environment and an e-learning strategy has recently been developed to guide institutional policy and practice.

71 While the annual satisfaction survey, and meetings with groups of students, indicated an overall level of satisfaction with the ICT and library facilities available to them, aspects of the provision drew adverse comment from some groups of students who met the review team. In particular, postgraduate research students perceived the library opening hours to be inappropriate for their purposes and would welcome an extension of the library opening hours during vacation periods. This sentiment echoes that expressed by postgraduate students who had met an ESRC visiting panel in March 2005. The team considered that UWA's response to the ESRC on the matter had not fully appreciated the particular needs of research students, a relatively small group at UWA, who study all year round.

72 The review team concluded that, overall, the learning resources available to students were of a high standard. However, it considered that UWA may wish to reflect on the way in which, having gathered students' views, it communicates with the student body about the action taken in response to student opinion. Noting the postgraduate students' views that their particular needs for library access in the vacation periods, particularly in the summer, are in danger of being overlooked, the team considered that it would be advisable for UWA to revisit this matter.

### **Academic guidance, support and supervision**

73 A range of centrally organised and departmental induction events, many offered bilingually, is mounted during the first week of term for undergraduates; and the induction programme was said to have been developed in accordance with QAA's *Code of practice*. The Office of Postgraduate Studies organises the induction of research postgraduates and is also responsible for organising their research training and development programme. Mechanisms are in place for gathering feedback from centrally provided induction of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Students, including postgraduate research

students who met the review team, valued the induction received.

74 All undergraduate students are assigned a personal tutor who acts as an important element in the support and monitoring process and whom students can approach in the event of academic or personal difficulties. Joint honours students studying in two departments are assigned one personal tutor in each department. Student-tutor meetings can be initiated by either party, may take the form of a group tutorial, or be part of structured academic and personal process review (APPR) activity. The effectiveness of these arrangements is monitored by the quality audit questionnaire, reports of SSCCs and departmental reviews. Research students receive academic and personal support from their main supervisor who will normally be part of a supervisory team. They also have recourse to the departmental postgraduate coordinator or Director of Postgraduate Studies should they prefer independent advice. Student and supervisor responsibilities are set out in the UWA Code of Practice for Research Postgraduates together with information about the postgraduate experience and details concerning progression and examination. The UWA Code reflects much of what appears in the corresponding section of QAA's *Code of practice*. Undergraduate and taught postgraduate students who met the review team spoke very positively about the quality of the support provided.

75 The maintenance and enhancement of the quality of the learning and teaching environment and the effectiveness of provision is a primary focus of UWA's learning and teaching strategy. This is developed, monitored and enhanced by the Learning and Teaching Strategy Implementation Group. The Student Support Services Committee monitors the effectiveness of UWA's arrangements for supporting students. Chaired by the PVC for Learning and Teaching, the Committee reports to Senate, and its membership includes representatives from the Guild of Students and academic departments.

76 UWA uses a variety of mechanisms to discharge its responsibilities with regard to the delivery of its Welsh Language Scheme, and the Centre for Welsh Language Services coordinates support for staff and students. Students studying through the medium of Welsh indicated a broad level of satisfaction with the support provided, particularly with the development of team and presentational skills. Although lecturers giving modules in Welsh were said to be highly supportive, the review team was told that some students had found the range of modules given in Welsh in departments other than Welsh to be more restricted than they had believed at entry. UWA provides support services for international students and for students from non-traditional backgrounds, for example, by providing language support and additional skills and competencies respectively. International students who met the review team spoke approvingly of the academic support they had been given.

77 The review team concluded that the academic guidance, support and supervision at UWA were of a high order and greatly appreciated by its students. The team viewed as good practice the high level of support given by the Welsh-speaking academics to students studying through the medium of Welsh.

### **Personal support and guidance**

78 The provision of advisory and counselling services is shared between the institution and the Guild of Students. UWA's Directorate of Student Support Services is responsible for pre and post-arrival support and welfare, including financial support, halls wardening, childcare, health and disability matters. The Guild of Students operates a Student Advice and Counselling Centre which covers counselling, health, accommodation, finance, immigration and academic matters. The review team noted that although the Guild wished to provide Welsh medium counselling, it was unable to do so because of recruitment difficulties. Support for international students is similarly shared with the Guild providing general advice to international students, and UWA's Department of Development and External Affairs taking

responsibility for their arrival and on-course support, particularly by providing language support through the Language and Learning Centre.

79 UWA has initiated a full review of student services and a working party, led by the PVC with responsibility for learning and teaching, and including academic staff representatives and an external assessor, has been engaged in interviewing staff in the various student support units, in addition to holding student focus groups and discussions with the Guild. Although the deliberations remained to be completed by the end of the scrutiny period, the development of a 'one-stop shop' approach to student services was anticipated to be a likely outcome.

80 In addition to the subject-specific and transferable skills embedded in modules and programmes, employability and generic skills are embedded in the curriculum via the Careers Development Programme which is included in academic modules in all but two departments. Reference has already been made to the Student Skills Competition (see paragraph 58 above). UWA's personal development programme (PDP), entitled APPR (see paragraph 74 above), is being extended to all undergraduate students. PDP schemes for taught and research students are under development. The Careers Advisory Service operates several work placement schemes and the development of employability skills is achieved through the Year in Employment Scheme. This scheme was praised by students who met the review team and was regarded by the team as a feature of good practice.

81 The review team noted that there was a generally high level of satisfaction with the support provided to students, a view borne out by the high scores in the 2006 National Student Survey. The current review of student services indicates that UWA is not complacent and is exploring ways of achieving greater integration of the different components of its provision.



## Procedures for student complaints and appeals

82 UWA's formal complaints procedure is set out in a handbook issued to new students each year and also available via the web. Complaints are monitored annually and a summary report produced for consideration by AAC. The main principle is to resolve a complaint at the lowest level possible, but to have available a series of clear stages through which it can be taken, culminating in an appeal to a PVC, or if unsuccessful, to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. Student complaints are dealt with on a confidential basis by staff not associated with the complaint. The review team noted the Rules and Regulations Committee's approval of a variation to the complaints procedure to deal with complaints arising from the industrial action that occurred whilst the review was taking place.

83 Information about the academic appeals process is contained in the 'Students' Examination Handbook for all Undergraduates' and the 'Code of Practice for Taught Postgraduates', provided to students at initial registration. Information about the appeals process is also available on the UWA website. The procedures distinguish between appeals in relation to progression for non-finalists, and appeals relating to taught or research degree results. In the case of the former, appeals are made to the Academic Progress Committee and, although the website indicated that students have the right to appeal to Senate against an Academic Progress decision, the review team was told that this was not, in fact, the case. Appeals relating to taught or research degree results are made to the federal University following verification by Aberystwyth. UWA intends to utilise, for its own purposes, an adapted form of the UW appeals procedure following the grant of degree awarding powers.

84 Students who met the review team were aware of the complaints and appeals procedures and the team concluded that the procedures in place for managing student complaints and appeals were appropriate and

satisfactory, and that they were fair and well-publicised to the student body.

## The institution's use of external reference points

85 Consideration of the *Code of practice, The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) published by QAA, and subject benchmark statements, has informed cross-institutional practice and the review team learnt that amendments to UWA policies and practices had been made following publication of sections of the *Code*. Examples included the establishment of the RDB; revised guidelines for external examiners; and a revised report form for external examiners of undergraduate programmes. Policies for the admission of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and for assuring the standards in the assessment of students, including assessment through the medium of Welsh, were said to be aligned with the relevant sections of the *Code*.

86 Procedures for the accreditation of prior certificated learning and prior experiential learning (APEL) were formulated and approved in the 2004-05 academic year, and based on the *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*, published by QAA. Reference has been made (see paragraph 46 above) to plans to improve alignment of the information provided in the data sheets with Section 7 of the *Code of practice* relating to programme approval, monitoring and review. The review team noted the involvement of UWA staff in contributing to revisions of sections of the QAA *Code of practice* and subject benchmark statements.

87 UWA has responded to the 2004 publication of QAA's revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* by undertaking a thorough review of all its policies, at all levels, relating to research postgraduates. This has resulted in UWA revising its own code of practice for research postgraduates, which now covers the entire postgraduate research student experience from admission, through the period of study, to the

submission of thesis, examination procedures and appeals. MPhil and PhD award requirements are set out in this code of practice and in UWA's 'Handbook for Supervisors', and reflect national standards for MPhil and PhD awards. As indicated elsewhere (paragraph 15 above), the RDB has recently been established to oversee all aspects of provision for research postgraduates, to monitor their performance and maintain awareness of current developments in the policies of the Research Councils.

88 UWA's learning and teaching strategy (2004 to 2009) lists ten key objectives, including the need to ensure that UWA is confident that its awards fully meet the expectations of the FHEQ at all levels, and there is explicit reference to the relationship between learning outcomes and the FHEQ in its procedures for programme approval and departmental review. UWA assesses all new programme proposals to ensure they meet the expectations of the FHEQ. Proposals for new awards must be accompanied by programme specifications which make explicit reference to the level of the proposed provision, and a link to subject benchmark statements is a prerequisite in the submission of any new or extensively revised degree programme, constituting a thorough and important part of the process of programme approval. Programme specifications are available for all taught programmes on UWA's website and they contain specific reference to the FHEQ and to subject benchmark statements, where appropriate, although this is at a general, rather than specific (learning outcome), level. Relevant documentation such as programme specifications, external examiner reports, and responses to such reports, are made available to panels as part of the departmental review process, which includes a check on the alignment with the FHEQ.

89 UWA defines the level of its modules by reference to level descriptors which are based on those in the England, Wales and Northern Ireland credit framework and consistent with the *Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales*. UWA is continuing to revise degree schemes to

reflect the appropriate levels of individual years of study through the process of 'levelisation'. All existing modules have been reviewed by faculties against the descriptors and all new modules are checked as part of UWA's standard approval processes. Similarly, UWA assesses all new programme proposals to ensure that they meet the expectations of the FHEQ. UWA is conscious of the challenges of the framework for master's programmes which are postgraduate in time, but not in level, and is awaiting the outcome of developments in the sector to ensure that it is not 'out of line'.

90 The review team noted that UWA is well able to respond to external initiatives, and that its staff are involved in formulation of elements of the Academic Infrastructure. The team formed the view that UWA takes account of the Academic Infrastructure in all its work and that the Academic Infrastructure had been used extensively and constructively in formulating UWA's own policies.

### **Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards**

91 Over time, Aberystwyth has assumed very significant responsibilities for quality and standards from the federal University, leading to changes in regulations and procedures, for example, in relation to admissions, academic progress, the modular system (including rules for progression and for the classification of awards), assessment, unfair practice, appeals (except against taught and research degree results), complaints, external examiners, and taught and research postgraduates.

92 UWA views the departmental review process as an important catalyst for change within departments, and AAC is currently reviewing the process in order to give programme-specific issues additional focus, and consider introducing student representation onto review panels. AAC is also reviewing departmental practice in giving students feedback on examination performance. Annual monitoring is a relatively recent innovation and

this, and the new style of periodic review, will be kept under review, as will the operation of the newly established RDB.

93 The review team noted that UWA is taking a 'more strategic approach to developing and sustaining Welsh-medium provision' and is putting in place a more effective system for its management, thus Welsh medium provision is now part of the portfolio of the PVC with responsibility for learning and teaching. Major reviews are also taking place in the areas of student support services and staff development, and UWA's PDP (known as academic and personal progress review or APPR) for undergraduates is about to be extended to taught and research postgraduate students.

94 The review team acknowledged the considerable challenges that had been faced by UWA on taking up the additional responsibilities consequent upon the devolution of responsibilities for quality and standards from the federal University and noted the positive progress made. The team considered that the current agenda for development is appropriate, noting especially the proactive role played by AAC. The team concluded that the quality assurance processes adopted had served as a basis for quality enhancement.

### **Reliability of information**

95 A considerable amount of material is available to students in hard copy and on the web both before and after they join the institution. A notable feature of UWA's institutional material is that all of it is available in English and Welsh, and this also applies to much departmental material. Formal responsibility for the accuracy of the undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses lies with the Marketing and Recruitment Office, which works with academic departments to produce the prospectus, and departmental heads are required to verify the accuracy of material supplied by their department. While prospectuses are centrally produced, departments may also produce brochures relating to specific provision. The Postgraduate

Office produces a number of handbooks for research postgraduate students.

96 Students who met the review team were generally satisfied with the accuracy of the prospectuses, the main caveat relating to the number of modules available in Welsh as well as in English, although it was acknowledged that the situation had improved greatly over the last three to four years. The team noted that the SWS endorsed this general level of satisfaction with only three per cent of the students contributing to the SWS questionnaire commenting that UWA had failed to meet their expectations.

97 All incoming new students are sent advance information on the services provided by UWA. In addition, students on taught and research postgraduate programmes receive copies of the relevant UWA code of practice. Departmental handbooks are also provided, and these were seen as helpful by students who met the review team.

98 UWA's Web Steering Group reports to the Management Information Committee and is currently exploring the acquisition of a content management system. The review team was able to verify that a considerable amount of material was available on the web concerning academic regulations and module and programme specifications, again in Welsh and English. The team saw examples of departmental brochures and handbooks and confirmed the usefulness of these. The team noted that the SWS referred to departmental efforts in communicating with students as particularly effective, with over 90 per cent of students being very, or generally, satisfied.

99 The review team concluded that communication at institutional and departmental levels was working well and that materials, both in hard copy and in electronic form, were of a good standard. Only in respect of the extent of provision of modules in Welsh was there seen to be a matter to be resolved by the students, and the team would therefore advise UWA to continue its efforts to improve the accuracy of its promotional material,

ensuring that students have realistic expectations of the extent of Welsh medium provision available to them.

100 Departments provide information about programmes and modules on web databases, supplemented by hard copy material. They also provide information on deadlines; submission of work; advice on plagiarism and unfair practice; assessment criteria; careers advice; and information for those on taught postgraduate programmes. UWA views its web-based module database, schemes database and programme specifications as core elements of its provision of information to students. Other key documents on the web include 'Introduction to Modularisation', 'Unfair Practice Regulation' and 'Academic Progress Regulation'. Students are able to view and update their web-based personal records.

101 The review team saw evidence to indicate that UWA was meeting Teaching Quality Information (TQI) requirements, as set out in HEFCW's document W0405HE, *Teaching quality information (TQI) requirements for higher education in Wales*. As required by this document, the team noted that information relating to the institutional context, student admission, progression and completion data, and information relating to the internal procedures used to assure quality and standards were readily available. Other relevant information appears on the HERO website.

102 The review team was confident that UWA would continue to cooperate fully in providing such information as required.

### Features of good practice

103 The following features of good practice were noted:

- i the integration of financial and academic planning through the work of the Planning Group in the Planning Round (paragraph 21)
- ii the rigour of the scheme (programme) approval and departmental review processes (paragraphs 23 and 28)

- iii the arrangements in place to support those students studying through distance-learning methods, particularly in the Department of Information Studies (paragraph 38)
- iv the thorough scrutiny of external examiners' reports and the clear allocation of responsibility for taking appropriate action in response (paragraph 44)
- v the work of the Careers Advisory Service in operating both the Student Skills Competition as a means of gaining feedback from employers of the students' acquisition of transferable skills and the Year in Employment Scheme (paragraphs 58 to 59, 80)
- vi the high level of support given by Welsh-speaking academics to students studying in the medium of Welsh (paragraphs 76 to 77).

### Recommendations for action

104 As UWA continues to develop its quality and academic standards management arrangements, particularly as it undertakes additional responsibilities accruing from devolution from UW, it may wish to consider the advisability of:

- i reviewing its current management of the quality agenda to enable it to adopt a more proactive stance (paragraph 20)
- 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)
- iii keeping its assessment regulations under review, taking note of practice in the wider higher education sector (paragraph 53)
- iv reviewing the access to the library in vacation periods, especially for postgraduate research students (paragraph 72)

- 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).

105 The review team considers further that it would be desirable for UWA

- 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).

## Appendix

### **The University of Wales, Aberystwyth's response to the institutional review report**

The University is pleased with the very positive outcome of the review report and the many features of good practice identified. The confidence expressed in the quality of our programmes and the academic standards of our awards is especially welcome. We are particularly pleased that specific attention was drawn to the rigour of our programme approval arrangements, the excellence of the support provided to distance learners and Welsh-medium students, the thoroughness with which we scrutinise the reports of the external examiners, and our engagement with employability issues.

The University's Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) has already started to give careful consideration to the main recommendations for action. With regard to recommendation (i) that we could be more proactive in the management of the quality agenda, the Deans of Faculties and the Academic Office are actively liaising with the HEA and other agencies with a view to providing clearer leadership in managing change around issues of quality in learning and teaching. In response to recommendation (ii) regarding the meeting of learning outcomes within the regulatory framework of our awards, we are undertaking a further AAC-led review of our examination rules. However, we note that since our assessment regulations had been reviewed, in the light of sector-wide norms, in the session immediately before the IR process began, it should be noted that the full impact of those changes on qualifying students would not be observable until after the IR process had ended. We will make further progress also in the current session with reviews of assessment regulations, and access to the library. We have already made substantial progress with regard to the form and content of module information provided to Welsh-medium students that make explicit reference to the proportions of Welsh-medium content.