QAA

North East Wales Institute of Higher Education

March 2007

Institutional review

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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 team of reviewers from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited North East Wales Institute of Higher Education from 5 to 9 March 2007 to carry out an institutional review. The purpose of the review was to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities for students and on the standards of the programmes of study that the Institute offers which lead to academic awards of the University of Wales.

To arrive at its conclusions the review team spoke to members of staff throughout the Institute, to current students, including student representatives, and read a wide range of documents relating to the way the Institute manages the academic aspects of its provision.

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.

Outcome of the review

As a result of its investigations, the review team's view of North East Wales Institute of Higher Education is that:

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

Features of good practice

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

- the model for building multifaceted employer links which afford a variety of benefits, including employer involvement in curriculum design and staff development opportunities

- the ready access students have to academic and personal support, which is facilitated by the commitment of staff in enabling students to achieve the most from their learning experience.

Recommendations for action

The review team also recommends that the Institute should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the programmes it offers are maintained:

Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to introduce greater formality into the operation of the committee system, particularly with regard to reporting and communication between committees and to ensuring that sub-groups have a clear remit, line of responsibility and timescale for reporting

- to develop systematic mechanisms at institution level for managing the dissemination of good practice identified within schools, including monitoring its wider implementation and evaluating its impact

- to adopt a more strategic approach to planning for learning resource requirements in the context of the ongoing process of curriculum renewal

- to formulate an institutional strategy for collaborative activity, in order to provide a framework for the development of partner links both in the UK and overseas.

National reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the review team also investigated the use made by the Institute 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 Institute was making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure.

Published information

The institutional review process includes a check on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the information about academic quality and standards published by institutions. The findings of the review corroborate that the Institute is meeting its responsibilities with regard to the coverage, accuracy, reliability and frankness of the information that it provides.

Main report

Main report

1   An institutional review of North East Wales Institute of Higher Education (NEWI or the Institute) was undertaken from 5 to 9 March 2007. The purpose of the review was to provide public information on the quality and standards of the Institute's programmes of study which lead to academic awards of the University of Wales.

2   The review was carried out by a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). For institutions in Wales it replaces the previous process of continuation audit (undertaken by QAA at the request of Universities UK and the Standing Conference of Principals (now Guild HE)). Institutional review also replaces assessments and engagements relating to the quality and standards of provision at subject level. The former were undertaken by HEFCW and the latter by QAA on HEFCW's behalf as part of its statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of education that it funds.

3   The review checked the effectiveness of NEWI's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of academic awards of the University of Wales; for reviewing and enhancing the quality of programmes of study leading to those awards; and for publishing reliable information. The scope of the review encompassed in-house and collaborative provision.

Section 1: Introduction: North East Wales Institute of Higher Education

The institution and its mission

4   NEWI or its precursors has been providing higher education in Wrexham since the 1890s and the Institute is currently located on two campuses in Wrexham. In 2004, NEWI became a full member of the University of Wales, having been an associate college since 1993, and is working towards obtaining degree awarding powers. With effect from 2005-06 it has been operating under the University's Interim Arrangements for the Devolved Model of Quality Assurance, which means that it has devolved responsibility for quality and standards, while there is a University-appointed assessor who monitors its quality assurance procedures and reports back to the University on them and on external examiners' reports. NEWI also offers BTEC programmes under a licence agreement with Edexcel.

5   In 2005-06, there were over 7,000 students at NEWI of which some 1,700 were following its programmes at partner organisations; more than half studied on a part-time basis, more than three-quarters were over 21 on starting undergraduate studies and most are from the surrounding region. There were 390 students on postgraduate taught programmes and 50 on research degree programmes. Twelve per cent were from European Union (EU) countries outside the UK and two per cent were from outside the EU.

6   The current academic organisation, introduced in 2005-06, comprises seven schools grouped within two faculties. Each grouping is the responsibility of an assistant principal, who also serves as dean of faculty. The academic leadership of each school rests with a head of school supported by subject leaders and programme leaders.

7   NEWI has a strong sense of regional mission, incorporating an emphasis on the employability of graduates and the socio-economic development of the region. It has embraced widening participation and seeks to attract students from the region who, as stated in the self-evaluation document (SED), 'for various reasons, have previously felt themselves excluded from the traditional higher education system'. NEWI also has close relationships with neighbouring further education colleges, which deliver NEWI-approved programmes and act as feeder institutions, as well as several collaborative arrangements with other colleges and partner organisations.

8   As stated in its Strategic Plan 2006-12,

'the Mission of the Institute is to provide quality higher education and research in a welcoming, friendly and supportive environment to meet individual, national and international needs; while the vision, which underpins all the Institute's action is to be a market-led student-centred university of international significance which is open to all'.

Collaborative provision

9   NEWI regards the development of partnerships and collaborative provision as fundamental to the delivery of its Widening Access and Participation Strategy. Most collaborative arrangements are in North Wales, although some programmes are offered in other parts of Wales and in the surrounding English counties. The provision is mainly offered on a part-time basis, with a smaller number of full-time programmes. The majority of franchised programmes lead to certificates or diplomas of higher education or to Edexcel qualifications. A limited number of Foundation Degrees are offered through collaborative arrangements, as are a small number of degrees in Art and Design with a long-standing partner, Coleg Menai. In terms of numbers of programmes, NEWI's main partners are, Coleg Llandrillo (13 programmes), Coleg Menai (13 programmes), Yale College (four programmes) and Deeside College (three programmes).

Background information

10   The information available for this review included:

- information published on NEWI's website

- the previous quality audit report on NEWI, published in 1996 by the Higher Education Quality Council (now QAA)

- reports on QAA subject engagements with Computing and with Sport and Exercise Sciences, undertaken in 2002 (not published)

- the report on the QAA special review of research degrees, 2005-06 (not published)

- NEWI's SED for the institutional review

- supporting documentation linked to the SED.

11   The review team also had access to a range of NEWI's internal documents, including documents relating to the thematic trails selected by the team (see paragraph 13 below). The team is grateful to NEWI for the access it was given to this information.

The review process

12   QAA conducted a preliminary meeting with NEWI in October 2006 to discuss operational aspects of the review. At this meeting, the students were invited through their Students' Union to submit a separate document expressing views on the student experience at NEWI and identifying any matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes and the standards of awards. They were also invited to give their views on the level of representation afforded to them and on the extent to which their views were taken into account.

13   QAA received the institution's SED in December 2006. The review team visited NEWI from 30 January to 1 February 2007 for the purpose of exploring with the Principal and Chief Executive, senior members of staff and student representatives matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SED or other documentation provided for the team. During this briefing visit, the team signalled a number of themes for the review and also identified 'thematic trails' in the Business School, the Criminal Justice subject area (within the School of Health, Social Care and Sports and Exercise Sciences), and collaborative provision. A programme of meetings for the review visit was developed and agreed with NEWI.

14   For the briefing visit the students presented a written submission (SWS) produced by student representatives on the basis of structured interviews with students conducted through workshops facilitated by a senior member of staff from the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The students indicated that

the SWS had been shared with the wider student community and with appropriate NEWI staff. There were no matters that the review team was required to treat with any level of confidentiality greater than that normally applying to the review process. The team is grateful to the students for preparing this submission to support the review.

15   The review visit took place from 5 to 9 March 2007 and involved further meetings with staff and students of NEWI and two of its partner colleges. The review team comprised Professor C Clare, Professor A Dugdale, Dr M Edmunds, Dr D Houlston, reviewers, and Ms D Cooper, review secretary. The review was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Developments since the previous review or audit

16   As the previous quality audit was undertaken in 1996, the SED focused on developments since more recent QAA reports, such as those on subject engagements and on a desk-based review of research degree programmes. None of these reports is in the public domain, in accordance with an agreement between QAA and HEFCW covering all such reports on higher education institutions (HEIs) in Wales. They all contained positive judgements with regard to quality and standards and the SED and supporting documentation outlined the mechanisms for addressing recommendations (see paragraph 50 below).

17   Developments of particular significance to the present review include the introduction of new procedures for programme approval (validation) with effect from 2006-07 (see paragraphs 34-35 below), and the requirement that the research and scholarship underpinning the curriculum should be explicitly evidenced in approval, monitoring and review processes. Also of relevance are the initiatives at both institutional and school level to enhance staff scholarship and develop research potential (see paragraphs 88 and 91-92 below). In addition,

there have been recent revisions to both executive and committee structures (see paragraphs 20-22 below) and a series of measures aimed at embedding the new middle-management arrangements based on schools within faculties.

18   The review team considered that NEWI had taken effective action in relation to strengthening its quality assurance processes, as illustrated by the major revision of procedures for programme approval and review (see paragraphs 34-39 below), although certain areas continued, in the team's view, to require further attention. These related to aspects of the operation of the committee system (see paragraphs 26 and 43 below); the approach to planning for learning resource requirements (see paragraph 100 below); and oversight of the development of collaborative activity (see paragraph 115 below).

19   The review team also noted the further development of known strengths, for example, employer links (see paragraph 81 below) and student support (see paragraphs 106 and 110 below). The team recognised that the findings of previous QAA review activity had been a catalyst for change and took this as further evidence of the Institute's engagement with external review processes.

Section 2: The review investigations: institutional processes

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards including collaborative provision

20   At the strategic level, main responsibility for the overview of quality and standards is shared between four senior posts reporting to the Principal and Chief Executive. These are: the two assistant principals, who between them manage the academic portfolio; the Registrar and Secretary, whose brief, covering institutional administration, includes academic services, student support services, and library

and information technology (IT) services; and the Director of HE Strategy and FE Development, who has overall responsibility for collaborative provision.

21   Within the two-faculty structure, the assistant principals act as deans and line managers for the heads of school within their respective faculties. Heads of school have managerial responsibility for the quality and standards of programmes offered by their schools. Some heads of school also have institutional responsibilities (which confer the title of dean) in the designated areas of learning and teaching, enterprise, and international students. The current executive structure has been in place since early 2006.

22   According to the SED, responsibility for academic standards and quality 'firmly resides' with Academic Board, which approves the Institute's Strategic Plan and Learning and Teaching Strategy. It is assisted by a number of subcommittees and those highlighted as 'most relevant' to the management of quality and standards are: the Curriculum Planning and Strategy Committee (CPSC), the Standards and Quality Committee (SQC), the Learning Teaching and Assessment Committee (LTAC), the Audit and Review Committee (A&RC), and the Research Degrees Committee (RDC). Assessment Boards also report directly to Academic Board. The principal procedural documents relating to quality and standards are the Academic Quality Handbook and the Academic Regulations.

23   While the broad role of each committee is indicated by its title, the SED clarified key aspects of their respective responsibilities as follows: CPSC decides on which proposals for new programmes or collaborative arrangements should proceed through detailed approval (and re-approval) processes (see paragraphs 34 and 112 below); SQC oversees policy development and implementation in respect of academic regulations and quality assurance (see paragraphs 41, 55, and 61 below); LTAC monitors implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, acting as a focus for the support of innovation in learning, teaching and

assessment and for the dissemination of good practice (see paragraphs 31, 55 and 94 below); A&RC applies an audit methodology to check on schools' management of quality and standards and also conducts institution-wide audits in other areas (see paragraph 44 below); and RDC oversees arrangements for the supervision, support and guidance of students on research degree programmes (see paragraph 105 below).

24   Other committees having an indirect impact on quality and standards include the various subcommittees which undertake detailed work on behalf of the main academic committees. Among these are: the SQC Business Committee (see paragraph 41 below); the SQC Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) subcommittee (see paragraph 52 below); and, reporting to LTAC, the Learning Resource and Technology Group (LRTG) (see paragraph 98 below). In addition, the recently established Employability, Enterprise and Third Mission Committee is responsible for careers activity in the context of student employability (see paragraph 80 below), while the Widening Participation and Retention Committee is responsible for admissions policy in the context of the Widening Access and Participation Strategy (see paragraph 66 below).

25   The SED acknowledged that with regard to the National Student Survey (NSS) there had been some doubt as to which committee had primary responsibility for overseeing NEWI's response (see paragraph 78 below). In discussion with staff, the review team found that there were other instances where staff were unclear about how the responsibilities of committees interrelated. In particular, there was uncertainty as to how inputs from other committees informed LTAC's developmental agenda (see paragraphs 43, and 54 below). There was also, in the team's view, a tendency to rely on heads of school, through their cross-membership of institutional committees, to direct items of business to the appropriate committee and between the executive and deliberative functions (see paragraph 94 below).

26   The review team noted that, in addition to the established subcommittees of the key academic committees, there were various institutional working groups, with currently four, including LRTG, reporting to LTAC alone. The team also learned of the existence of 'task and finish' groups which could be set up by any committee to undertake specific projects within the scope of its work plan. The team noted one case where a committee created a project group whose work overlapped with a task already embarked upon by another committee (see paragraph 57 below). It also saw instances of a committee having to actively seek information about progress from its working groups, rather than receiving this as a matter of routine report. Therefore, the team considers it desirable for the Institute to introduce greater formality into the operation of the committee system, particularly with regard to reporting and communicating between committees and to ensuring that subgroups have a clear remit, line of responsibility and timescale for reporting.

The institution's view of the effectiveness of the framework

27   In the SED, NEWI expresses confidence that it has developed a sound framework for quality assurance and the maintenance of academic standards. It bases this confidence on its engagement with external reference points and the explicit emphasis given in its processes to the importance of external involvement. The framework is regularly reviewed and evaluated, with amendments made though formal processes and systematically recorded in updates to procedural documents.

28   By way of illustration, the SED indicated that a review of the efficiency and effectiveness of Academic Board was undertaken in 2005-06, which resulted in the revision of the terms of reference of its main subcommittees with responsibility for overseeing quality assurance and enhancement (SQC and LTAC) to address overlap in their remits. This review notwithstanding, and in light of subsequent changes to executive structures and to quality assurance procedures, the review team reached the conclusion that further consideration should be given by the Institute to certain aspects of the operation of the academic committee system (see paragraph 26 above).

The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

29   NEWI's plans for the enhancement of quality and maintenance of standards centre on the following:

● the development of its academic staff

● the development of its academic programmes

● the enhancement of student support systems.

30   The development of academic staff is to be achieved through providing opportunities for continuing professional development; promoting innovative academic and professional practice; and disseminating good practice. Under the approach being adopted, schools have primary responsibility for both the delivery of academic quality in their constituent subject areas and the management of quality assurance and enhancement, in particular through the annual monitoring process.

31   The development of academic programmes is to be achieved by adopting innovative approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, in particular with LTAC continuing its work to encourage further diversity in assessment, while also maintaining standards. There are plans to expand e-learning and, related to this, an institutional strategy is under development. Increased opportunities for studying in Welsh are also planned. The process of curriculum renewal is to continue, with the next stage focusing on the efficiency gains to be derived from introducing common modules and shared teaching across programmes. The intention is to release staff time for research and scholarship, which will in turn feed into curriculum development.

32   The enhancement of student support systems is to be achieved by strengthening the 'hub and spokes' model of central student services linked to school structures as these continue to mature. The objective is to provide fully integrated arrangements for academic and personal support, so that students know where to seek help when they need it.

33   The review team found evidence that the Institute had begun to take forward much of this work (see paragraphs 91, 95 and 107 below). Strategic objectives were clearly set out in both the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the new Strategic Plan, with responsibilities for achieving targets clearly allocated and key performance indicators identified. The team concluded that the Institute's plans for enhancement reflected both continuous and initiative-driven improvements that were related to strategies with definite targets and timescales for achievement.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

Programme approval (validation and scrutiny)

34   Procedures for programme approval were revised in September 2006. New programmes are approved through a process known as validation. This entails an initial approval of the proposal by CPSC which concentrates on the strategic and academic rationale of the programme. Subsequently there is a prevalidation event in which an internal review panel meets with the programme team to identify any further work required to strengthen the proposal. The validation event itself involves a panel with two members external to the University of Wales and considers the relevance, currency and validity of the programme against set criteria. At each stage, the proposal can be referred back to the relevant school for further work. When the validation panel approves the programme and any conditions have been met, the chair reports to Academic Board, which takes the final decision whether to add the programme to the Institute's portfolio. In the case of a collaborative arrangement, the partner organisation, as well as the programme, must be approved (see paragraph 112 below).

35   A programme is valid for five years, after which it must be revalidated by the same process; however, in the fourth year there is a programme scrutiny which provides input to the validation, or may recommend withdrawal of the programme in the light of current market conditions. Programme scrutiny is conducted by a panel including one external member and considers the programme team's reflective commentary on the programme's performance; afterwards the panel reports to CPSC on the health of the programme. CPSC takes this report into account at the initial approval stage of the programme revalidation.

36   The SED described these procedures as both 'stringent' and 'streamlined', in that they distinguished approval (validation) from review (scrutiny), placed emphasis on the role of head of school in managing the staged process, and introduced an administrative check on prevalidation conditions. The review team examined the process in relation to the BA (Hons) Criminal Justice - the first programme to be taken through the new process. It was evident to the team that the final documents for validation had been the result of a thorough, iterative process, with the proposal having been returned to the school for amendment at both the initial approval and prevalidation stages. The team was able to see from documentation the emphasis given to staff research underpinning the proposal.

37   Staff meeting the review team confirmed that the process had worked in a streamlined way, with active involvement from the Head of School. Having the same chair for the prevalidation and validation events, and one external assessor common to both scrutiny and validation, was seen by staff to have assisted continuity. 'Pertinent, relevant, discursive and not just a case of jumping through hoops' was how the programme team described the experience. The progressive revision of the programme proposal, in terms of learning objectives and the particular blend of e-learning

and face-to-face delivery, lent support to the view that the process provided opportunity for reflection.

38   Academic Board has recognised that the new process imposes a considerable workload on schools, the central administration and the chairs of validation panels. The review team considered it likely that this workload would increase, given the prospect of new programmes being introduced in the 'market-led' environment envisaged by the Institute. In discussion with staff, the team was told that the additional workload would be eased by new senior administrative appointments and some flexibility in the validation timetable. Furthermore, extensive staff development was being undertaken to support the implementation of the new procedures.

39   In summary, while it was rather early for the review team to reach a firm conclusion on the effectiveness and efficiency of the new procedures, based on their operation, the team was able to verify that they were comprehensively and clearly described in the Academic Quality Handbook 2006-07, that they had been communicated to staff through a variety of fora, including the Principal's address to staff, and that preparations had been made for the anticipated impact on staff workload. In addition, the establishment of CPSC, composed of senior staff, appeared to the team to have a significant and important role in filtering proposals, such that only those likely to succeed would be allowed to progress through the full validation process.

Annual monitoring

40   Programme monitoring is based on the annual monitoring report (AMR) produced by the programme leader, which is a combined report and action plan in a set format. In the case of collaborative programmes, partner organisations use the same pro forma and their reports are incorporated into the AMR for the equivalent in-house programme. The AMR draws on staff and student evaluations, external examiner reports, employer and professional body feedback, performance and progression data, and the outcomes of other review processes. The action plan is built around the key issues identified in the report and carries forward any items outstanding from the previous year's plan, detailing specific actions to be taken within stated timescales. Programme AMRs are considered at an annual monitoring meeting held at the subject level and attended by two academic staff from outside the subject area, at least one of whom must be a member of SQC or LTAC. The meeting provides an opportunity for confirming that appropriate monitoring is taking place, debating issues impacting on quality and standards, agreeing action plans and identifying good practice.

41   Central oversight of the monitoring process is undertaken by the SQC Business Committee, which receives minutes of the subject-level meetings, together with reports from the external attendees. The Committee then produces a summary report for consideration first by SQC and then by Academic Board. A separate report on collaborative provision is also produced. At this stage, an annual monitoring plenary session for staff is held to enable them to comment on the summary report and provide feedback on the process. The SED indicated that, while arrangements for annual monitoring were well-embedded, there was variability in the level of analysis in the AMRs and that the plenary session had been used to draw this to the attention of programme teams and encourage improvement for next year.

42   From its analysis of AMRs, the review team considered these to be generally evaluative reports supported by all the requisite data, and in some cases giving very full details on specific topics. There was clear evidence of monitoring against action plans through, for example, monthly management meetings and mid-cycle progress reviews. Minutes of school-level meetings showed these to be well attended and the discussion to be wide ranging. Scrutiny by the SQC Business Committee appeared to be thorough; there were instances of AMRs having been returned to schools with requests for clarification. Institutional summary reports

identified both critical issues and features of good practice and, in the team's view, gave an appropriate overview of the outcomes of annual monitoring.

43   The review team noted that discussions at SQC and Academic Board were concerned with process issues, such as improvements to the reporting template to reduce variability and the late submission of some AMRs. It was thus not clear to the team how the good practice identified during the annual monitoring process was being followed up. There was mention at subject-level meetings of referring examples to LTAC, but the team was unable to ascertain whether these were being pursued or taken forward. The team accepts that cross-membership of committees and informal meetings between committee chairs might enable information to be exchanged; nevertheless, it considers it desirable for the Institute to develop systematic mechanisms at institution level for managing the dissemination of good practice identified within schools, including monitoring its wider implementation and evaluating its impact.

Periodic review

44   In addition to programme scrutiny (see paragraph 35 above), there is the separate process of subject review. This looks at a set of cognate programmes every five years to test that the quality assurance arrangements at subject level are working effectively. Subject review is conducted under the authority of A&RC, whose audit function also covers thematic audits, school audits, audits of operational areas and, until recently, regular collaborative audits (see paragraph 112 below). Subject review is based on a self-evaluation document produced by the relevant subject team and involves a panel event chaired by a senior staff member; internal panel members are drawn from outside the subject area and two external assessors provide the necessary subject expertise. The review report commends good practice and makes recommendations; these are addressed through school action plans which are monitored by A&RC until the review is signed off.

45   From documentation, the review team considered subject review to be a thorough process, which gave due emphasis to ensuring the independence of the review from the school's management structure. Staff meeting the team explained that the role of A&RC in providing independent verification of the health of a subject area was strengthened by the fact that its members were typically not on other committees. The team understood that the outcomes of subject review were intended to inform annual monitoring (see paragraph 40 above) and the new programme scrutiny process (see paragraph 35 above), but it was not persuaded that this was yet occurring in practice. It noted one instance in which CPSC had deferred a programme scrutiny in the belief that there were no quality assurance concerns, even though a contemporaneous subject review had noted concerns to which A&RC required an urgent response. While unable to determine whether this was a communication or scheduling problem, the team was clear in its view that careful planning of subject review and programme scrutiny cycles would be crucial to ensuring that they were mutually supportive processes and did not impose unacceptable workloads.

46   At the time of the review visit, the audit model was in a state of transition, in that changes in approach to both school audit and collaborative audit were under consideration, with the latter likely to be superseded by a variant of the approval process for partner organisations, under the aegis of CPSC (see paragraph 112 below). As the Institute brings these deliberations to an early conclusion, the review team encourages it to update the terms of reference of the relevant committees, so that it is clear where responsibility for different aspects of these processes lies.

Summary

47   The review team concluded that the Institute was still working through the effects of changes to its approval and review procedures, but was itself aware of the need to continue to evaluate the operation of the revised procedures and make adjustments as necessary.

This was illustrated by the opportunities given to staff to comment on procedures as part of this evaluation process.

External participation in internal approval, monitoring and review processes

48   The procedures for programme validation, scrutiny, subject review and for approving the delivery of programmes through collaborative arrangements all involve external assessors as members of approval or review panels. The majority are academic subject peers, although professional practitioners are also used. They are selected and approved according to published criteria by centrally managed processes, although schools may provide nominations. The essential role at programme level is to ensure appropriate benchmarking against national standards, while in subject review it is to provide critical externality to an audit process. The requirement for independence is firmly embedded and external assessors should have no recent association with NEWI, thus precluding the use of serving external examiners. External examiners are, however, involved in approving programme modifications, and their reports also provide a key input to annual monitoring. In addition, external participants are used as consultants during programme development.

49   From documentation, the review team was able to verify that scrutiny of school nominations for external assessors was thorough; there were instances where nominations which did not meet the criteria had been rejected. In the case of the scrutiny and validation of the BA(Hons) Criminal Justice, it became clear to the team that the specialist input of external participants had contributed much to the reflective commentary, while at the end of the validation process confirmation is to be provided by one of the external assessors that the conditions for approval have been met. Similarly, the team saw examples of the effective participation of external assessors in subject review. It concluded that NEWI used external advice constructively and that

externality in approval and review processes was strong and scrupulous.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

50   QAA subject engagements with Computing and Sport and Exercise Sciences, in 2002, led to positive outcomes. The associated reports, whilst made available to the review team, were unpublished; therefore the content is not disclosed in this report. Under current arrangements responsibility for the consideration of subject review reports, now mainly internal reports, rests with A&RC (see paragraph 44 above), which would also receive any QAA reports, although these are no longer routinely produced at subject level. The procedure for dealing with the findings of reviews is to require a response and action plan from the relevant programme team against which progress is monitored by A&RC.

51   With respect to the reports on the subject engagements, the review team was able to verify that extant procedures were followed. For example, it proved straightforward, from committee minutes, to track how a particular issue raised in one report was progressed until eventual sign-off by A&RC. The team noted that there was a parallel process involving RDC in relation to the action plan resulting from the QAA review of research degree programmes (2006), leading it to conclude that an appropriate institutional overview of external review reports continued to be maintained.

52   NEWI places great importance on obtaining accreditation for its programmes as a means of facilitating student employability - this being a key performance indicator within its Strategic Plan. Overseeing relationships with PSRBs is the responsibility of the PSRB subcommittee, which maintains a central record of accreditation links. Under revised terms of reference, the subcommittee now takes an active role in authorising applications for accreditation, as well as following up on action resultant from PSRB accreditation and monitoring reports. Procedures for preparing applications were strengthened with effect from

2005 and now require formal approval of proposals by both the relevant head of school and faculty dean, prior to scrutiny by the PSRB subcommittee.

53   From documentation, it was clear to the review team that staff were alert to the requirements of relevant PSRBs. For example, programmes were designed both to allow accreditation of students' prior learning (APL) on the basis of their professional qualifications and to meet the criteria for PSRB accreditation. In addition, the design of the AMR form encouraged staff to seek the widest possible recognition of programmes for PSRB accreditation.

54   Based on its reading of committee minutes, the review team formed the view that the PSRB subcommittee was establishing itself as an effective source of guidance on applications for accreditation and developing useful expertise in the area. In discussions with staff the team encountered none of the resistance to central involvement in schools' relationships with PSRBs alluded to in the SED, rather it found that staff accepted the advantages of such central involvement, since PSRBs sought assurance of institutional support for the student experience. The team considered the PSRB subcommittee to be thorough in its approach to its remit, but to be less active in drawing out common themes from its work, in particular any features of good practice apparent from PSRB reports, worthy of wider dissemination.

Assessment practice and procedures

55   In its approach to the management of assessment, NEWI seeks to draw the distinction between the role assessment plays in assuring standards and the role it plays within the learning process. The Academic Regulations prescribe the conduct of assessment, the operation of the two-tier system of module assessment boards and award/progression boards, and the mechanisms for dealing with mitigating circumstances and review of assessment board decisions; all these areas are within the remit of SQC. An Assessment Guidance and Policy Handbook is produced as

a supplement to the Academic Regulations and is intended to assist staff in a variety of practical matters concerning the assessment of taught programmes, such as assessment design, alignment with learning outcomes, assessment load, marking, moderation and feedback; these areas, which are related to pedagogic practice, are within the remit of LTAC.

56   Assessment practice at programme level is monitored through routine validation, scrutiny, monitoring and review processes, which apply equally to collaborative provision. It is a topic external examiners are required to cover in their reports and which therefore features in the annual institutional summary report of external examiners' comments (see paragraph 61 below). The analysis of student performance in assessment provides statistical information relevant to policy management at all levels of the Institute (see paragraphs 64-65 below).

57   At the time of the review, the Assessment Guidance and Policy Handbook was being revised. The review team learned that this task had been combined with a project instigated by SQC in response to issues raised in external examiner reports, the University of Wales' assessor's report and the NSS, particularly in relation to the moderation of assessment tasks and students' entitlement to feedback. The team understood that the process of revision would deal with the inconsistencies identified in the application of assessment procedures across the Institute by updating existing policies and clarifying the distinction between policy, which was mandatory, and guidance, which was not. The opportunity would also be taken to confirm the alignment of procedures with the revised section of the *Code of practice,* published by QAA, on the assessment of students. Whilst acknowledging the expertise within the working group formed to review the Handbook and the progress now being made, the team noted that the line of responsibility had been switched to SQC from LTAC and that in the process valuable time had been lost in getting started on the task, which, moreover, appeared to have been assigned no firm deadline for completion.

58   In discussions with school staff, the review team learned how the needs of particular groups within a diverse student population were being met through the development of alternative forms of assessment. The team recognised that aspects of practice were being shared between schools through informal networks, centrally organised activities, such as assessment clinics and staff conferences, and discussions at LTAC. However, there was little indication that LTAC was engaging in routine evaluation or promotion of particular strategies or methods. In addition, from the sample of collaborative programmes looked at by the team, moderation arrangements were found to be in place to ensure consistency of marking with equivalent in-house programmes. Notwithstanding the NSS rating of feedback on assessment, the students whom the team met were positive about the quality of the feedback they obtained and the structured way in which it was delivered in some programmes through formally timetabled sessions.

External examiners and their reports

59   Arrangements for the appointment of external examiners for taught programmes, their core functions and reporting responsibilities are set out in the Academic Regulations. All programmes are required to have at least one external examiner from an HEI outside the University of Wales. Where programmes are offered through collaborative arrangements, it is institutional policy that the external examiner appointed to a programme will cover both in-house and collaborative provision of that programme. Separate arrangements apply to the external examining of research degrees, for which NEWI assumed devolved responsibility in 2006-07.

60   All aspects of external examining are drawn together in The Handbook for External Examiners (within the Academic Quality Handbook). Reflecting NEWI's two-tier structure of assessment boards, separate roles are defined for subject and award external examiners. The subject external examiner deals with the standards of assessment in a specific group of

modules, whereas the award (chief) external examiner ensures that decisions on progression or award for individual students are made in accordance with assessment regulations. There is a centrally organised induction day for new external examiners, which includes briefing from the host school.

61   External examiners are required to submit their annual reports on a standard form; this was revised for 2006-07 to allow separate reporting on collaborative programmes. At institution level all reports are read by the Assistant Principal and Academic Registrar and a summary of the reports is produced for SQC. This forms the basis of the overview report presented to the University of Wales following approval by both SQC and Academic Board. At school level, reports are read by the head of school and considered by programme teams as part of annual monitoring, for which purpose they are also forwarded, as relevant, to collaborative partners. Programme leaders are responsible for responding to external examiners on how their comments have been addressed; however, any institution-wide issues are dealt with centrally, leading to a separate response to the external examiner.

62   In the SED, NEWI expressed its confidence in the operation of its external examiner system. In the context of arrangements for the appointment and induction of external examiners, this confidence was based on the benchmarking of these procedures against the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* and against arrangements operating in other UK HEIs. In the context of engaging with external examiners and responding to their reports, NEWI's confidence in the soundness of its approach was based particularly on the tracking system built into its overview report, which allows it not only to check that issues raised are being addressed but also to monitor any recurrence of similar issues year-on-year.

63   The review team considered the Handbook for External Examiners to be both clear and comprehensive and to fulfil its stated purpose as 'a user friendly document' which

'defines the role that NEWI expects of [its] external examiners'. From its analysis of reports and committee minutes, the team was able to corroborate that external examiners' comments were being dealt with systematically and the issues they raised considered seriously and acted upon at the appropriate level within the Institute. It was apparent to the team that there had been a patchy response to the section of the report form requesting comment on the extent to which research and scholarship was underpinning the curriculum; however, the team also noted that the same observation had been made by Academic Board, which was seeking to resolve the issue by providing external examiners with contextual material within which to frame their responses in future.

Student admissions and the use made of progression and completion statistics

64   Data are gathered at various stages as students progress through their programmes and the SED indicated that statistical analysis was focused on understanding the performance of different groups within the student population and using this information to guide the Institute's strategic approach to issues such as widening participation, retention, employability and regional contribution.

65   NEWI produces centrally a variety of statistical reports or datasets for both management and academic committees, derived from the student record system, which also forms the basis of the annual return to the Higher Education Statistical Agency and other statutory returns. There are in addition a number of smaller databases, for example one covering research students, and these are also centrally administered. Among the datasets provided are the programme statistics on which programme teams are required to comment as part of annual monitoring.

66   NEWI operates an institutional admissions policy (most recently updated in December 2006) within the framework of its Widening Access and Participation Strategy. There is an ongoing debate on entry requirements, in particular whether baseline tariff points should be raised. The review team noted that the

proposal to consider increasing entry requirements was based on benchmarking against those of competitor institutions, but that before reaching a conclusion NEWI was to conduct further analysis of the impact that higher tariff points might have had on the decisions of existing students whether or not to come to the Institute. The team also noted the priority given to understanding the reasons students withdraw from their programmes and the use of retention survey data in demonstrating the correlation between assessment performance and retention, as well as the impact of such analysis in shaping the work of LTAC (see paragraph 31 above).

67   The review team gained the impression that significant progress was being made in both the use and utility of statistical data. For example, the external examiner overview report for 2004-05 identified improvements in the presentation of students' results to assessment boards, while senior staff who met the team emphasised the increasing availability and importance of data in informing policy and decision making. They also stressed the Institute's commitment to improving the presentation and use of data at all levels and the team noted that SQC had set itself specific targets for this in its work plan for 2006-07. The team concluded that NEWI was making good use of data and was also in a good position to develop its statistical reporting capacity.

External reference points

68   SQC is responsible for keeping abreast of developments to the Academic Infrastructure and for ensuring that these are considered within the Institute such that its policies and procedures are consistent with best practice in the sector. The approach adopted is to embed the recommended good practice and more regulatory aspects, such as *The framework for higher education qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) within the Institute's own regulations, policies and procedures.

69   In respect of revisions to the *Code of practice*, the review team saw many instances of these having been taken into consideration in

the Institute's regulations or procedures. One example was the incorporation in the role specification of the external examiner of 'core functions', taken from the *Code,* while another was the use, as part of a recent thematic audit, of a comprehensive grid to check the Institute's practice against the revised section of the *Code* on admissions to higher education. In the specific case of assessment conducted in the Welsh language, QAA's guidelines on effective practice have been addressed in the Institute's Welsh Language Scheme and associated action plan. The QAA review of research degree programmes provided further confirmation of alignment of NEWI's practice with the *Code.*

70   In respect of the FHEQ and subject and qualification benchmarks, these are used as reference points in programme validation, scrutiny and review processes. NEWI has also implemented the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales. The review team was able to verify that staff were aware of the Academic Infrastructure and making use of its various elements. Programme specifications are a requirement for all programmes, including those offered through collaborative arrangements, and within these specifications, descriptions of programme structures clearly indicate the credit ratings of component modules. In addition, the team saw much evidence of professional and occupational standards being used as reference points in programme design (see paragraph 53 above).

71   The review team concluded that NEWI was making appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure; in particular it had in place, through SQC, a suitable mechanism for dealing with revisions to the *Code of practice* and for maintaining the consistency of its procedures with the relevant sections. The annual revision of the Academic Quality Handbook was clearly instrumental in ensuring that new developments to the Academic Infrastructure were communicated and implemented. In the team's view, SQC was actively tackling its remit 'to engage with the external HE and PSRB environments', as manifest by the extent of staff involvement in the processes by which external agencies developed their various frameworks.

Student representation at local and institutional level

72   Students are represented at all levels of the Institute. At the highest level the NEWI SU President is a member of the Board of Governors and of its Student Affairs Committee, which together with Academic Board - itself having several student members, including the President - has responsibility for establishing the procedures which affect students, such as those relating to complaints, conduct, discipline and suitability for practice (see paragraph 82 below). Students are members of most Academic Board committees. The SWS stated that NEWI SU had reached an agreement whereby its executive members could join committees of their choosing and that so far two had become involved with the work of different committees under this arrangement.

73   All schools are required to have staff-student consultative committees (SSCCs) and the principles and operational procedures for these are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook. These allow flexibility as to the form SSCCs may take, and various models are permitted including subject committees, programme committees, open student forums and focus groups, but all must be chaired or facilitated by someone from outside the relevant subject or programme area, meet at least twice a year, follow a student-led agenda and keep formal records of meetings. There is a single SSCC for research students, which operates at institutional level.

74   Despite the variety of forms of SSCC, the review team found the students it met were all familiar with the particular system of representation in their school or partner organisation and were able to give examples of issues that had been raised and satisfactorily dealt with. Staff welcomed the ability to use different formats to suit different student groups. From joint initiatives such as the development of a student representative handbook and training sessions, it was apparent to the team that NEWI SU and the Institute had a common interest in turning opportunities for student representation into

meaningful engagement with the work of committees. There were also examples of active student involvement in project groups, such as the group formed by LTAC to explore ways of improving feedback mechanisms for students (see 78 below). The team concluded that the Institute's arrangements for student representation were operating effectively and were being assisted by the enthusiasm of the present executive of NEWI SU.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

75   As well as through representation on committees (see paragraphs 72-73 above), students are able to give feedback by completing various questionnaires. At programme level these include student perception of modules (SPOM) and student perception of courses (SPOC) questionnaires, although programme teams may implement alternative feedback models. At institutional level they include an annual internal survey, specific surveys conducted by central service providers, and now the NSS.

76   The SED clarified that student feedback on programmes 'must find formal expression in annual monitoring and review reports', and this applies equally to collaborative programmes. However, the SED also admitted that although there were systems for analysing and responding to student feedback, there was no formal system for routinely informing the student body of changes made as a result of their feedback, and that this was particularly the case for surveys conducted at institutional level. Regarding such surveys, the SED raised concerns about low response rates and survey fatigue, and that internal feedback systems were not picking up some issues identified in the NSS. In the context of SPOMs and SPOCs, the SWS suggested that better feedback would be provided if questionnaires were not collected by staff, and in response NEWI is piloting a system of collection by student representatives.

77   The review team saw consistent evidence of the evaluation of student feedback in the annual monitoring process. The team also saw from minutes of SSCCs that these committees routinely discussed and responded to student feedback. Students at partner colleges confirmed that they too completed NEWI questionnaires. The results of the 2006 NSS have increased the focus on student feedback and some of the issues raised have been referred to programme teams for discussion at SSCCs and follow-up through annual monitoring.

78   Both the internal institutional survey and the NSS have been widely discussed at Academic Board, SQC and LTAC. While the review team noted the initial lack of clarity as to which committee had primary responsibility for receiving institutional survey reports and ensuring they were acted upon, the team was assured that responsibility for specific issues raised in the NSS was now explicitly assigned (see, for example, paragraphs 57 above and 99 below). Concerns about the lack of formal channels for communicating with students about institution-wide issues have led LTAC to propose the establishment of a student representative sub-group comprising one representative per programme. Meanwhile, the student survey group is looking at the design and format of the internal institutional survey, focusing on its ability to elicit information on the overall academic experience, as well as on ways of improving the response rate. Given this distributed approach to dealing with aspects of student feedback, the team encourages the Institute to ensure adequate coordination of the work of the various sub-groups, so that timely results are achieved.

79   There is currently no institutional system for obtaining feedback from graduates, save to the limited extent provided by surveys of leavers' first destinations (employment or further study). An alumni manager has recently been appointed to develop alumni relations, including existing arrangements for the mentoring of students.

80   NEWI has extensive links with employers, providing feedback which assists in the development of programmes and services. At

Institute level, the recently established Employment, Enterprise and Third Mission Committee brings together responsibility for careers activity and knowledge transfer, and, in the context of employability, would have a strategic input to curriculum development. At school level, the 2006 Curriculum Review details a wide range of links with local employers and interest groups. The importance attached to such links is reflected in the level of scrutiny given to them in the AMR pro forma dealing with employer links. Further employer feedback is provided by the 'Go Wales' project which manages work placements.

81   The review team encountered examples of different types of employer links. In the case of Criminal Justice, the programme team has focused on links with the police and other agencies which enable students to undertake voluntary work related to their studies and employment prospects. In the case of the engineering link with Airbus, there is a full partnership in the design and delivery of a combined Foundation Degree and higher engineering apprenticeship scheme, involving a significant proportion of work-based learning at Airbus. In separate discussions with students and staff, the review team was told that students received 'excellent' support through regular meetings with vocational tutors and work-based assessors and that there were 'excellent' library and equipment resources for the programme. Airbus also contributed to staff development activities, in recognition of the need to keep academic staff up to date with emerging technological developments. Regular employer feedback on the programme was secured through weekly meetings between the Airbus apprenticeship manager and the NEWI programme manager. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the model for building multi-faceted employer links, which afford a variety of benefits, including employer involvement in curriculum design and staff development opportunities.

Procedures for student complaints and academic appeals

82   In September 2006 NEWI assumed responsibility from the University of Wales for appeals, which became the subject of its own procedure, known as review of assessment board decisions. The procedure explains the basis on which an appeal may be brought, the process for conducting the review and also makes clear that there is recourse to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) once the internal process is exhausted. There is a separate complaints procedure which covers dissatisfaction concerning the way a programme is taught or assessed; learning support; misleading information in prospectuses, advertising or promotional material; and any deficiencies in the performance of central service functions, such as library, accommodation and student support services. Both appeals and complaints procedures are included in the Academic Regulations, which also contain procedures for dealing with disciplinary offences and academic or professional misconduct, as well as the associated procedures for challenging decisions in these areas.

83   The SED indicated that appeals and complaints procedures were published on NEWI's website and, in addition, issued to students at the 'home' campus and at partner organisations on enrolment, when students were also given an institutional handbook - the Essential Guide (see paragraph 116 below). This draws students' attention to a range of student-related procedures, providing summary information on how to avail of them.

84   The SWS confirmed that the Essential Guide explained satisfactorily how to access regulations and complaints information, while also suggesting that retrieval of electronic documents would be facilitated by improving links between the web-pages published by the central administration and the 'student zone', more commonly visited by students. The review team also learned that NEWI SU was developing its capacity to provide independent support for students in respect of appeals and

complaints, and that it had received encouragement from senior staff and assistance in implementing a complaints database.

85   The review team considered that the scope of both appeals and complaints procedures was clearly defined; in particular, it was made explicit that neither provided a basis for challenging the academic judgement of assessment boards. The team recognised that such procedures were necessarily written in a formal style, but also noted the efforts made to present them in a student-friendly way, such as through the clear diagrammatic representation of the appeals procedure and the inclusion in the Essential Guide of a named contact for student complaints. There was also encouragement of an initial informal approach to the resolution of issues, which might obviate the need to invoke formal procedures. The team further noted that the introduction of a revised mechanism for dealing with concerns about students' suitability for professional practice had been accompanied by workshops for staff in relevant areas to help them assimilate the procedural changes.

86   The review team considered that the annual report on student complaints, presented to the Student Affairs Committee, provided a comprehensive summary and analysis of the subject, indicating an improving situation compared with the previous year. Students meeting the team gave examples which demonstrated that procedures were being effectively applied and monitored within the Institute. The team concluded that the arrangements for managing student appeals and complaints were sound and aligned with the relevant section of the *Code of practice*.

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

87   The Human Resources (HR) Strategy 2004-06 clarified as priorities for staff recruitment that academic staff should have a doctorate, or have the ability to gain one within five years, or that staff should be of an equivalent standing if professional experience

was being sought. All teaching staff are expected to have appropriate teaching qualifications, and those having less than three years' teaching experience are required to complete NEWI's in-house postgraduate certificate in professional development in HE, which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and leads to registered practitioner status. Graduate teaching assistants are required, as a minimum, to follow designated modules of the postgraduate certificate programme. Staff working as research supervisors must attend briefing on the Institute's Code of Practice for the Conduct of Research Degrees, while inexperienced supervisors also complete a specific training module to develop their supervisory skills.

88   The SED explained that NEWI was in the process of implementing the national framework for pay modernisation, set to be completed by August 2007. The review team understood that linked to this development would be a re-evaluation of staff roles and refinement of the present staff review process (see paragraph 92 below) to introduce personal development planning against agreed targets, although the detail was still the subject of ongoing discussion with staff representatives. Supplementary forms of reward include teaching and research fellowships, which provide financial support for staff to develop their scholarship, for example by studying for a doctorate, or pursuing an agreed research project. In addition, awards for teaching excellence are given to individuals or teams able to demonstrate innovative practice.

89   The review team noted the steps being taken to assess the extent to which research and scholarship were informing the curriculum, this being an indicator of the effect of staffing policy, including staff development (see paragraphs 91-92 below). The review leading to the publication Research and Scholarship Underpinning the Curriculum provides an apt illustration, while there is also a specific focus on demonstrating research-based curriculum developments in programme validation and monitoring. The team considered staff engagement with professional standards in

teaching to be strong, with over 70 per cent of teaching staff being HEA-registered practitioners. The team learned that NEWI was targeting a further increase and would continue to support staff through assistance in the application process and a contribution to registration fees. Staff who met the team were of the view that, notwithstanding the focus on building research capability, sufficient recognition was being given to innovative practice in teaching and learning in the allocation of fellowships and awards, which they saw as complementary rather than competing schemes. The team concluded that the Institute was making steady progress across a range of staffing policies to promote synergy between research, scholarship and teaching.

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

90   Support for new staff begins with a two-day induction to teaching and learning at NEWI, after which they embark on mandatory training programmes dependent on their level of experience (see paragraph 87 above). Staff following in-house programmes are each assigned a mentor and all teaching staff are routinely supported in developing their practice through a peer observation scheme which is now well embedded. The main vehicle for identifying staff development needs is the Individual Staff Development Review (ISDR), which for teaching staff is normally conducted by their head of school or subject leader. A specific development programme for heads of school was introduced in 2005-06 to support new academic management structures.

91   At institutional level, responsibility for staff development lies with the Staff and Educational Development Unit (within the HR function), which receives ISDR reports and organises a programme of staff development events. The Centre for Pedagogical Research and Scholarship has recently been established to strengthen links between pedagogical research, scholarship and teaching, and is now responsible for the administration of the

fellowship and awards schemes. The SED emphasised the close relationship between these two central bodies, in that the Unit had been 'one of the driving forces' behind setting up the Centre.

92   The SED indicated that a new model for continuing professional development (CPD) planning was being introduced to complement the ISDR process, which for academic staff would entail mapping their work against HEA professional standards. The review team learned that CPD planning was one element within a framework which NEWI was in the process of implementing with the objective of achieving better targeted staff development. Another element was the use of school and service department staff development plans to align individual staff activities with strategic priorities. The team also noted that the CPD framework had recently been accredited by HEA; the first in Wales and only the second in the UK to achieve this.

93   The review team was unable to reach any firm view about these newly revised arrangements, although it considered the associated explanatory guide to be clear and comprehensive. While hitherto schools' intentions for staff development had typically been embedded within school plans (rather than set out in a separate schedule to the plan), it was, nevertheless, apparent to the team that the focus had been on facilitating scholarly activity and the pursuit of academic or professional qualifications. The team saw one example of a plan relating to a collaborative programme where staff development activities were also open to staff in partner organisations. However, the team found little evidence of take-up by partner staff of the development opportunities offered by NEWI, although induction, mentoring and peer review were in place to assure standards of programme delivery.

94   Based on discussion with a range of staff, the review team found that staff were generally uncertain about how school plans were currently informing staff development activities at institutional level. Neither was it evident to

the team where within the academic committee structure issues such as take-up or effectiveness were being monitored to ensure that staff development was supporting strategic objectives. For instance, although LTAC has a monitoring role for staff development in the context of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, its minutes gave little indication of any discussion or review of activity over the past year. The team was assured by senior staff that the Chair of LTAC met regularly with the Head of the Staff and Educational Development Unit to identify staff needs and decide on themes for training. Nevertheless, the team encourages LTAC to make full use of formal communication and reporting channels to ensure that it maintains an overview of staff development and provides the intended forum for schools to exchange ideas about activities relating to teaching and learning.

Assurance of quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods

95   The BA (Hons) Criminal Justice, first validated in 2002, is the only current programme delivered through e-learning, although it utilises 'blended learning', a mix of electronic and face-to-face delivery. The Academic Quality Handbook specifies additional requirements for approval of programmes delivered by distance or e-learning, which are concerned with ensuring the reliability and fitness of the delivery system, the quality of the teaching materials and the provision of a clear work schedule for students. An institutional strategy for e-learning is under discussion to guide future development in this area and the management of an increasing use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) in support of face-to-face teaching.

96   The review team examined the operation of the BA(Hons) Criminal Justice blended-learning scheme. It found there was widespread enthusiasm for the scheme - from external examiners, from external assessors involved in the programme scrutiny and revalidation, and from staff and students whom the team met.

The students explained that e-learning enabled them to engage in higher education whilst having child-care or work responsibilities and praised the comprehensive introduction they received to use of the VLE, commenting that it encouraged even those who were inhibited to participate in virtual classroom discussions. Monitoring statistics showed that the system was heavily used, whilst the students were particularly appreciative of the responsive technical support available. Documentation from the programme scrutiny and re-validation processes showed that the programme team had carefully considered the balance of face-to-face and e-learning tuition and had responded to student concerns that some modules were too difficult for e-learning alone. The special requirements for delivery by e-learning had been observed in the approval process, with the panel being given access to the VLE site so that it could share the same online experience as the students.

97   The review team concluded that the expertise gained in the use of e-learning on the BA(Hons) Criminal Justice programme provided a firm foundation for development of the Institute's e-learning strategy. It also demonstrated the commitment of staff to providing students with access to higher education and all possible support for the learning experience.

Learning support resources

98   NEWI's principal learning support resources are the responsibility of the Library and IT Services. The learning resource implications of every programme are identified during the validation process; subsequently, programme leaders annually provide the library with the programme's reading list and this is met as funds allow. LTRG has recently been established to strengthen the forum at which learning resources and budgets are discussed with staff and student representatives so that school decisions on spending allocations might be better informed. Allocation of teaching accommodation is overseen by the Space Management Committee.

99   Student feedback on library and IT facilities and support is collected mainly through surveys. The SED acknowledged that the mostly positive feedback from internal surveys had been contradicted by some comments in the latest NSS and that these were now being directly addressed by LRTG. The SWS alluded to problems with library access for certain student groups, but the team was told by the students it met that the Institute had responded by extending library opening hours. The SWS recognised the VLE as 'an excellent informative tool' while the SED indicated that some 80 per cent of staff now provided learning support material using the VLE. Students from partner organisations confirmed that their access to the VLE was both useful and reliable.

100 The review team noted that the 2006 Curriculum Review had proposed a number of new or modified programmes and it discussed with senior staff the resource implications of this agenda. The team was told that resources for new academic developments could gain financing from an internal fund established for this purpose or, in some cases from HEFCW special funding, and that additional small amounts might be made available from LRTG or from schools themselves. The team considered that there would be benefit in planning for learning resources in a more coherent manner, particularly as it was aware that some schools had over-spent against their library allocation as a consequence of recent validation activity. The team therefore considers it desirable for the Institute to adopt a more strategic approach to planning for learning resource requirements in the context of the ongoing process of curriculum renewal.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

101 Academic support for students is primarily provided by schools, in particular through personal tutor systems and through supervisory arrangements for research students. Support for students with 'learning differences' is available centrally through the Student Support Centre, which incorporates a DfES registered centre for conducting diagnostic assessments and which provides tutor support commensurate with the formal assessment of individual students' needs, as well as access to specialist IT facilities.

102 A variety of mechanisms is employed for tracking students' progress and for giving systematic feedback and academic guidance. These include: tutorials where examination results, assessed coursework and performance in practical assignments are discussed; equivalent arrangements for research students in the form of progress reviews; and Personal Development Planning (PDP) sessions, which are a requirement in all schools, although they are permitted to set up their own systems. In addition, there are formal supervisory and visit arrangements for students on work placements that form an integral part of their programme, while regular contact is maintained with students on work-experience projects.

103 The SED gave a balanced account of the Institute's view of its extensive student support arrangements, drawing a distinction between the variability which was deemed to be flexibility of approach and the variability which was deemed to be inconsistency of treatment. For example, with regard to PDP, it was considered that a single model of implementation might not be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of all students, but it was recognised that there was inconsistency in the extent to which PDP was embedded in different schools. The SED drew attention to the 'close links that developed between staff and students' at NEWI, which were 'seen as crucial to underpin effective and sustainable support systems …for students with diverse learning needs', citing previous QAA reviews as evidence of students' appreciation of these links.

104 The SWS took a similar line, indicating the many different ways in which students obtained feedback on assessment and guidance on their progress, while also pointing to differences in the comprehensiveness of written feedback. Students briefing the team elaborated on the variability in PDP arrangements, which they saw as least effective when PDP was not integrated within programme structures, or when students

were not seeking career development from their programmes. The SWS indicated that most students found their lecturers 'friendly, approachable and helpful' and that 'all believed NEWI to be a close-knit community'.

105 The review team considered that NEWI had effective processes for monitoring the various aspects of student academic support. The internal institutional survey revealed that for the significant majority of respondents support and supervision were meeting their expectations. External examiner comments on the quality and utility of feedback on students' assessed work were typically positive and action was in train to remedy inconsistencies where these had been identified (see paragraph 57 above). As a supplement to progress reviews, the achievement of key milestones by research students was also closely monitored by the Postgraduate Office and RDC. The issues surrounding PDP were being further investigated - a student-led survey had been undertaken, which confirmed that most students had been offered a PDP session, while a teaching fellowship had been awarded to examine links between PDP and the curriculum.

106 In discussion with students, the review team came to appreciate the full extent of the benefits available through support arrangements. The 'pre-fresher' workshops, aimed at first-time entrants with no family tradition of HE, and the 're-fresher' equivalent to prepare students for the second stage of their programmes were clearly achieving their purpose of building students' confidence as learners. The support available to students with 'learning differences' which enabled them to keep pace with the demands of their programmes was highly valued for the inclusivity it promoted. The phrase from the SWS, 'without the Institute's steadfast commitment I would never have achieved…' captures the sentiments expressed by several students as they recounted their own experiences at NEWI. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the ready access students have to academic support, which is facilitated by the commitment of staff in

enabling students to achieve the most from their learning experience. This applies equally to personal support arrangements.

Personal support and guidance

107 According to the SED, student support services at NEWI have developed considerably over the past four years, with Student Services, the main provider, taking a pro-active role in areas covering counselling, welfare, finance, and careers, in addition to the disability and learning support arrangements outlined above (see paragraph 101 above). Student access is coordinated through a services information desk (SID) set up in 2005 and through the student welfare centre, organised jointly by NEWI SU and Student Services. For postgraduate and international students, support is also available directly from the Postgraduate and International offices respectively. NEWI's commitment to the continued development of student support is demonstrated by its decision to fund enhancement of the staffing of Student Services from its 'supplementary income stream' (a HEFCW allocation to HEIs in Wales in 2006-07).

108 The SED included a comparison of the student profile on entry with the employment record of graduates within six months of exit, which showed that while a significant proportion of students fell within the categories used to identify social exclusion from higher education, over 90 per cent went into 'meaningful' employment or continued their studies on graduation. The SED also made clear that this achievement depended on removing, as far as possible, 'the obstacles to success faced by students … to allow [them] to concentrate on their studies', and that this relied on the delineation of responsibilities between staff for academic and personal support being purposely fluid. The SWS reinforced this view of comprehensive and integrated services.

109 The review team considered that the information on student support made available through the student zone on the NEWI website and published in the Essential Guide was well

organised and found the students whom it met were familiar with how to gain access to support, in particular through SID. Indeed several of them had used or were using particular services, either on an occasional or regular basis and they were full of praise for the support they received. They indicated that while referral mechanisms between schools and central services were the route for some students, increasingly more students made initial contact through SID. Staff meeting the team confirmed that the intention was to establish SID as the main gateway to student support as a means of facilitating students' independence in seeking access to relevant services. In this context, the team noted that student representatives were putting forward a number of ideas to encourage take-up by students of the services available to them.

110 Meetings at school level reinforced for the review team that student support services were meeting the needs of different groups of students, including part-time students, those based at partner organisations, and international students. Regarding the planned expansion in international student recruitment, senior staff were clear about the associated implications in terms of providing language support and assisting teaching staff to appreciate the learning styles of different cultures. In the context of one particular programme, the team noted the high failure rate among international students and would flag the need for rigorous pre-entry language testing as another implication for the Institute as it develops its international and collaborative strategies. This point notwithstanding, the team was left in no doubt about the strong ethos within NEWI for ensuring that student support provided a firm foundation to the learning experience.

Collaborative provision

111 NEWI's collaborative arrangements are predominantly based on a franchise model, whereby the whole or part of a NEWI programme is delivered by staff employed in a partner organisation. Memoranda of agreement set out the respective responsibilities of NEWI

and the partner organisation(s). The majority of franchised programmes are also delivered as in-house programmes at NEWI and the approach to managing quality and standards is based on the recognition that mainstream procedures are mostly appropriate for application to collaborative provision, but may require specific supplement. For example, the Academic Regulations fully apply to collaborative programmes, whereas the normal procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review pertain, but are supplemented by procedures for establishing the suitability of the partner organisation for the delivery of the programme.

112 The latter procedures entail approval of the partner organisation (institutional approval) for a fixed period of five years (after which re-approval is required), followed by approval for specific programme(s) to be delivered in the partner organisation, which includes an evaluation of staffing and learning resources. Both approvals involve panel events, with the approval panel for programme delivery having external representation. Responsibility for ratifying the decisions of approval panels has recently been assigned to CPSC, although SQC will also receive reports, together with a commentary from CPSC, in line with its remit for collaborative arrangements. In the case of institutional re-approval of a partner organisation, reports may, in addition, be referred to A&RC, if the need for more sustained monitoring is envisaged. These arrangements replace the previous system under which institutional and programme approval rested with Academic Board and institutional re-approval was undertaken by A&RC through a collaborative audit. The future of collaborative audit is currently under review by the Institute.

113 Once a collaborative arrangement is up and running, programme management lies with schools and is normally the responsibility of the programme leader in the 'host' school, who liaises with a programme leader in the partner organisation. For the purposes of quality assurance, collaborative provision is treated in the same way as the equivalent

in-house provision, so is subject to mainstream processes. The application of these processes to collaborative provision is covered under the relevant sections of the report.

114 The review team was able to verify that memoranda of agreement were consistent in format and coverage and were updated annually in the light of anticipated student numbers. Staff meeting the team were clear about the relative responsibilities of NEWI and partner organisations. They stated that liaison arrangements worked well and that issues were resolved effectively, assisted by the fact that most collaborative programmes had an in-house equivalent. Moreover, partner staff were actively participating in annual monitoring through the submission of AMRs. The team was unable to comment on the new reporting arrangements for approval panels; nevertheless, it assumed that the rigour of scrutiny previously applied by panels would continue under the new regime. Similarly, with regard to the institutional re-approval process for partner organisations, the team found collaborative audit, its precursor, to have been a systematic process, the output from which had formed the basis of a 'learning from audit' overview report.

115 The SED indicated that institutional management of collaborative activity had been strengthened by the appointment in January 2006 of the Director of HE Strategy and FE Development. In particular, communication between NEWI and its partners had been enhanced through the introduction of a forum for senior staff from partner organisations to discuss strategic and managerial issues with relevant senior staff at NEWI. At the time of the review visit, this group had met twice to discuss inter alia how it might contribute to an institutional strategy for collaboration, which NEWI was just starting to develop. With respect to collaboration with overseas organisations, the review team learned that currently there were no plans to franchise programmes overseas, but other forms of collaboration were being actively pursued. The team considers it desirable and timely for the Institute to formulate a strategy for collaborative activity, in order to provide a framework for the development of partner links both in the UK and overseas.

Section 3: The review investigations: published information

The students' experience of published information and other information available to them

116 Information about NEWI is accessible to students from a variety of sources. These include prospectuses and student guides, notably the Essential Guide or main institutional handbook, as well as the Institute's website. There is also more focused information available to students from programme handbooks, which are produced by schools to a standard format, and from the student zone on the intranet. As a matter of policy, NEWI publishes much of its information in Welsh, as well as in English.

117 The SED stated that in preparing prospectus material, NEWI used a student focus group to provide a perspective on matters such as use of 'plain language' and appeal to target groups. The SWS confirmed that promotional material was published in various forms, giving most students their preferred option, and also corroborated that information on both programmes and central services was generally regarded by students as accurate and relevant. Students meeting the review team considered the information issued at induction to be clear and comprehensive in relation to module content and assessment. Once started on their programmes, the students found the VLE to be a useful and developing source of more detailed information. Those from partner organisations clarified that the information they received explained the relationship of their programmes to NEWI, and also how to access any services and facilities available from NEWI. Independently, the team was able to verify that partner websites gave due prominence to NEWI's role in collaborative provision.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

118 A newly formed editorial board oversees the publication of all Institute and school promotional material, providing institutional authorisation for the publications within its remit with regard to accuracy, consistency of style and compliance with NEWI's Welsh Language Scheme. The membership of the board includes school staff, as well as staff from central marketing and communication functions. There is an additional requirement that all school-based publications are also authorised by the relevant head of school.

119 The review team considered the editorial board to represent a strengthening of arrangements which hitherto had relied on schools conforming to corporate guidelines in the preparation of materials, rather than specific authorisation of school-based publications. The team also learned that the remit of the board was to be extended, with effect from September 2007, to cover materials produced by partner organisations on collaborative programmes. The team concluded that NEWI had implemented a robust system to ensure that reasonable reliance could be placed on the accuracy, reliability and completeness of the information it publishes or authorises to be published using its name.

Findings

Findings

120 An institutional review of North East Wales Institute of Higher Education was undertaken during the week 5 to 9 March 2007. The purpose of the review was to provide public information on the quality of the Institute's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility for the standards of the associated awards. This section of the report summarises the findings of the review. It concludes by identifying features of good practice that emerged from the review, and by making recommendations to the Institute for improving on current practice.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

The framework for managing quality and standards

121 According to the Institute, responsibility for academic standards and quality resides firmly with Academic Board, assisted by its sub-committees. In certain areas the review team found staff to be unclear about how the responsibilities of these committees inter-related. There was also, in the team's view, a tendency to rely on heads of school, through their cross-membership of institutional committees, to direct items of business to the appropriate committee and between the executive and deliberative functions. With respect to the various working groups and project groups formed by academic committees, the team concluded that these were not always set up with sufficient regard to work being undertaken elsewhere in the committee system; neither was there always sufficient clarity in the remits and timescales for reporting assigned to such groups (see paragraph 161 i below).

122 In the context of collaborative provision, the Institute has just started to develop a strategy, which it is discussing with its existing franchise partners. The review team considered the formulation of an institutional strategy to be timely, particularly since various forms of collaboration with overseas partners were being actively pursued (see paragraph 161 iv below).

Programme approval, monitoring and review

123 A revised programme approval process has been implemented from 2006-07. This comprises initial approval on strategic and academic grounds, followed by separate pre-validation and validation events. At each stage, a programme proposal can be referred back to the relevant school for further work. The process culminates in a report from the validation panel to Academic Board, which takes the final decision whether to add the programme to the Institute's portfolio. A programme is valid for five years, after which it must be re-validated by the same process; however, in the fourth year there is a programme scrutiny which provides input to the validation, or may recommend withdrawal of the programme. There are additional requirements for the approval of programmes delivered by distance learning or e-learning, concerned with the quality of the teaching materials and the delivery system. In the case of a collaborative arrangement, the partner organisation, as well as the programme, must be approved.

124 Programme monitoring is based on the AMR produced by the programme leader; this is a combined report and action plan in a set format which incorporates collaborative provision. The AMR draws on staff and student evaluations, external examiner reports, employer and PSRB feedback, performance and progression data, and the outcomes of other review processes. AMRs are considered at subject level meetings, and minutes and reports from these meetings inform an institutional summary report which is passed upwards through the committee system to Academic Board. A separate report following the same committee route is produced on collaborative provision. At this time there is an annual monitoring plenary session for staff to enable them to comment on the summary reports and provide feedback on the process.

125 In addition to programme scrutiny, there is a separate process of subject review, which looks at a set of cognate programmes every five years to test that the quality assurance arrangements at subject level are working effectively. Subject review is based on a self-evaluation document produced by the relevant subject team, follows an audit approach and results in a report which commends good practice and makes recommendations; these are addressed through school action plans which are centrally monitored until the review is signed off. It is one of several audit processes, including school audits, audits of operational areas and, until recently, regular collaborative audits.

126 The Institute regards its programme approval procedures as stringent and streamlined; however, it was rather early for the review team to reach a firm conclusion on the effectiveness and efficiency of such a newly implemented process. Nevertheless, the team was able to verify that procedures were comprehensively and clearly described in the Academic Quality Handbook, that they had been communicated to staff through a variety of fora, and that preparations had been made for the anticipated impact on staff workload. In addition, the initial approval stage (involving a senior committee) appeared to the team to have a significant and important role in filtering proposals, such that only those likely to succeed would be allowed to progress through the full validation process. The validation of the BA(Hons) Criminal Justice (the first programme to be taken through the new process), showed that the iterative nature of the process encouraged reflection, placed emphasis on the role of head of school in managing the various stages, and had, in the team's view, led to the development of a strengthened programme proposal. The validation process was also an example of the successful application of the approval procedures to a programme delivered, in part, through e-learning.

127 The Institute considers that its arrangements for programme monitoring are fully embedded, albeit with some variation in the level of analysis in AMRs. The review team considered the AMRs it saw to be generally evaluative and supported by all the requisite data; there was also clear evidence of monitoring against action plans. Scrutiny at subject and institutional levels appeared to be thorough and identified both critical issues and features of good practice. In the team's view, institutional summary reports gave an appropriate overview of the outcomes of annual monitoring. However, it was not clear to the team how the good practice identified during the annual monitoring process was being followed up; specifically the team was unable to ascertain whether examples recognised at subject level were being systematically pursued or taken forward at institutional level (see paragraph 161 ii below).

128 The Institute values the degree of independent verification that its audit methods afford. The review team found subject review to be a thorough process, which gave due emphasis to ensuring the independence of the review from the school's management structure. The team considered that careful planning of subject review and programme scrutiny cycles would be crucial to ensuring that they were mutually supportive processes and that this would require formal liaison between the committees responsible for the respective processes. At the time of the review visit, changes in approach to both school audit and collaborative audit were under consideration, with the latter likely to be superseded by a variant of the approval process for partner organisations. As the Institute brings these deliberations to an early conclusion, the team encourages it to update the terms of reference of the relevant committees, so that it is clear where responsibility for different aspects of these processes lies.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

129 As well as through representation on committees, students are able to give feedback by completing questionnaires relating both to their programme of study and to the broader

student experience. The review team saw consistent evidence of the evaluation of student feedback in programme monitoring and review.

130 The Institute is concerned that internal feedback systems are not picking up some issues identified in the NSS and the review team noted that, as a result, the Institute was introducing measures to strengthen formal channels for communicating with students about institution-wide issues and also reviewing the design and format of its internal institutional survey. In addition, the team noted that the Institute was taking steps to develop alumni relations as the primary mechanism for obtaining feedback from graduates.

131 The Institute has extensive links with employers and other agencies, providing feedback which assists in the development of programmes and services. The review team encountered examples of several different types of link, and in the case of the engineering link with Airbus there is a full partnership in the design and delivery of a Foundation Degree, involving a significant proportion of work-based learning at Airbus. The review team learned that Airbus provided learning resources and student support and also contributed to staff development activities, in recognition of the need to keep academic staff up to date with emerging technological developments. The team identifies this model for building multi-faceted employer links as a feature of good practice (see paragraph 160 i below).

132 The Institute places considerable importance on obtaining accreditation for its programmes as a means of facilitating student employability. The review team considered that the institutional committee overseeing this activity (PSRB sub-committee of SQC) was establishing itself as an effective source of guidance on applications for accreditation and developing useful expertise in the area, but found it to be less active in drawing out common themes from its work, in particular any features of good practice apparent from PSRB reports for wider dissemination (see paragraph 161 ii below).

Summary

133 The review team concluded that the Institute was still working through the effects of changes to its programme approval and review procedures, but was itself aware of the need to continue to evaluate the operation of the revised procedures and make adjustments as necessary. The team found that the approach to programme monitoring was rigorous and that an appropriate institutional overview was being maintained. Where the Institute had identified any deficiencies, these were being suitably addressed. This ability to reflect on its own strengths and limitations and to act accordingly supports the judgement of confidence in the soundness of the Institute's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes. Nevertheless, the team considered there was scope for more systematic dissemination of good practice so that its potential for quality enhancement might be fully realised.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

Assessment practice and procedures

134 The Institute's assessment regulations and procedures (which apply equally to collaborative provision) are set out in the Academic Regulations; these prescribe the framework within which assessment of taught programmes is conducted. In addition, the Assessment Guidance and Policy Handbook assists staff in a variety of related practical maters.

135 The Institute is aware of certain inconsistencies in the application of assessment procedures across schools, particularly in relation to the moderation of assessment tasks and students' entitlement to feedback. As part of a project to address these issues, the review team learned that the Assessment Guidance and Policy Handbook was being revised to clarify the distinction between policy, which was mandatory, and guidance, which was not. The team considered that indecision over which

institutional committee would oversee the process of revision of the Handbook had led to valuable time being lost in getting started on the task. Nevertheless, it recognised that good progress was now being made.

Use made of statistical data

136 The Institute produces centrally a variety of statistical reports or datasets for both management and academic committees, derived from the student record system. Among the datasets provided are the programme statistics on which programme teams are required to comment as part of annual monitoring.

137 The Institute recognises the importance of data in informing policy and decision-making and is committed to improving the presentation and use of data at all levels. The review team gained the impression that significant progress was being made in both the use and utility of statistical data. This was aptly illustrated by the use of retention survey data in demonstrating the correlation between assessment performance and retention, as well as the impact of such analysis in encouraging further diversity in assessment practice, while also maintaining standards. The team concluded that the Institute was making good use of data and was also in a good position to develop its statistical reporting capacity.

External examiners and their reports

138 The Institute's arrangements for the appointment of external examiners to taught programmes, their core functions and reporting responsibilities are set out in the Academic Regulations. In addition, all aspects of external examining are drawn together in a Handbook for External Examiners. External examiner reports are a key input to programme monitoring; they also form the basis of an overview report ultimately presented to the University of Wales. Separate arrangements apply to the external examining of research degrees, for which NEWI assumed devolved responsibility in 2006-07.

139 The Institute expresses confidence in the operation of its external examiner system. This is based on the benchmarking of its procedures against the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* and against arrangements operating in other UK HEIs, and on the tracking system built into its overview report, which allows it not only to check that issues raised are being addressed but also to monitor any recurrence of similar issues year-on-year.

140 The review team considered the Handbook for External Examiners to be clear, comprehensive and user-friendly. From its analysis of reports and relevant committee minutes, the team was able to corroborate that external examiners' comments were being dealt with systematically and the issues they raised considered seriously and acted upon at the appropriate level within the Institute.

Summary

141 The review team concluded that procedures for assessment, monitoring student achievement and external examining were being operated effectively. Specifically, it found the use of external examiners in summative assessment to be strong and scrupulous. These factors support the judgement of confidence in the soundness of the Institute's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its programmes and of the associated awards.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

The means by which the quality of teaching staff is assured

142 All teaching staff are expected to have appropriate teaching qualifications, while inexperienced research supervisors develop their supervisory skills through completing a specific training module. The Institute encourages staff to develop their scholarship through offering teaching and research fellowships, which give financial support, as well as through awards for teaching excellence given to individuals or teams able to demonstrate innovative practice. Staff are also

routinely supported in developing their practice through a peer observation scheme which is now well embedded.

143 The main vehicle for identifying staff development needs is the ISDR, which for teaching staff is conducted by their head of school. At institutional level, responsibility for staff development lies with the Staff Educational Development Unit (within the HR function), which receives ISDR reports and organises a programme of staff development events. The Institute is implementing a framework to achieve better targeted staff development. One element of this is the introduction of a new model for CPD planning to complement the ISDR process; another is the use of school and service department development plans to align individual staff activities with strategic priorities.

144 The review team found staff engagement with professional standards in teaching to be strong, with over 70 per cent of teaching staff being HEA-registered practitioners. However, the team was unable to reach any firm view about the newly revised arrangements for staff development planning, and found from its discussions with staff that there was some uncertainty about how school plans were currently informing staff development activities at institutional level. While the team concluded that the Institute was making steady progress across a range of staffing policies to promote synergy between research, scholarship and teaching, it considered that, in the area of staff development, better use might be made of the academic committee structure to monitor activity across the Institute and evaluate whether strategic objectives were being supported.

Learning support resources

145 The Institute's learning support resources are the responsibility of the Library and IT Services. The learning resource implications of every programme are identified during the validation process; subsequently, programme leaders annually provide the library with the programme's reading list and this is met as funds allow. Student feedback on library and IT facilities and support is collected through

surveys. The mostly positive feedback from internal surveys was contradicted by some comments in the latest NSS and these are now being addressed.

146 The Institute proposes to develop a number of new or modified programmes (as set out in the 2006 Curriculum Review) and the review team discussed with senior staff the resource implications of this agenda. The team noted that resources for new academic developments could gain financing from several disparate sources. It also noted that some schools had over-spent against their library allocation as a consequence of recent validation activity. The team reached the conclusion that there would be benefit in planning for learning resources in a more coherent manner (see paragraph 161 iii below).

Student support and guidance

147 Academic support for students is primarily provided by schools, in particular through personal tutor systems and through supervisory arrangements for research students. A variety of mechanisms is employed for giving students feedback on their progress and academic guidance. These include tutorials, progress reviews (for research students), and PDP sessions, which are a requirement in all schools. Support for students with 'learning differences' is available centrally through the Student Support Centre (under the management of Student Services).

148 Student Services is the main provider of 'welfare' support services, covering counselling, welfare, finance, and careers, in addition to the disability and learning support arrangements mentioned above. Student access is coordinated through a central services information desk and through the student welfare centre, organised jointly by NEWI SU in conjunction with Student Services. For postgraduate and international students, support is also available directly from the Postgraduate and International offices respectively.

149 In evaluating its arrangements for academic support, the Institute draws a

distinction between the variability deemed to be flexibility of approach and the variability deemed to be inconsistency of treatment. The review team considered that the Institute had effective processes for monitoring the various aspects of academic support. Action was in train to remedy inconsistencies where these had been identified and, in particular, variability in the extent to which PDP was embedded in different schools was being investigated. In discussion with students, the team came to appreciate the full extent of the benefits available through student support arrangements. Pre-session preparatory workshops were clearly achieving their purpose of building students' confidence as learners and the support available to students with 'learning differences' which enabled them to keep pace with the demands of their programmes was highly valued for the inclusivity it promoted.

150 Given the characteristics of the student profile, the Institute aims to ensure that, as far as possible, the obstacles to success faced by many students are removed, believing that this relies on the delineation of responsibilities between staff for academic and personal support being purposely fluid. It regards the close links that develop between staff and students as crucial to underpinning effective and sustainable support systems and has recently committed funding for additional staff resources in this area. Discussions at school level reinforced the view that student support services were meeting the needs of different groups of students, including those based at partner organisations. The review team identifies the ready access that students have to academic and personal support as a feature of good practice (see paragraph 160 ii below).

Summary

151 The review team concluded that the Institute's processes for supporting teaching and learning were generally operating effectively and were strengthened by regular monitoring and evaluation. In particular, the team was left in no doubt about the strong ethos within the Institute for ensuring that student support provided a firm foundation to

the learning experience. These conclusions support the judgement of confidence in the soundness of the Institute's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes.

External involvement in internal quality assurance mechanisms

152 The procedures for programme validation, scrutiny, subject review and for the approval of the delivery of programmes through collaborative arrangements all require external assessors as members of approval or review panels. The requirement for independence is firmly embedded, precluding the use of serving external examiners. External examiners are, however, involved in approving programme modifications, and their reports form an input to annual monitoring.

153 The Institute considers that the involvement of external assessors represents an area of strength within its quality assurance processes. The review team was able to verify that scrutiny of nominations for external assessors was thorough and it also saw examples of their effective contribution in both approval and review processes. As previously mentioned, the Institute has a comprehensive system for soliciting, processing and responding to external examiner reports at both programme and institutional levels (see paragraphs 138-141 above). It has also dealt appropriately with external review reports, through the development and subsequent monitoring of action plans. The team found that programme teams used external advice constructively in curriculum development and that externality in approval and review processes was strong and scrupulous. This contributed to the judgement of confidence in the capacity of the Institute to satisfy itself that academic standards and quality are being effectively managed and meet its requirements.

The institution's use of national reference points

154 The Institute's approach to the Academic Infrastructure is to embed within its own

regulations, policies and procedures, the recommended good practice and more regulatory aspects. For instance, the FHEQ and subject and qualification benchmarks are used as reference points in programme validation, scrutiny and review processes. The Institute has also implemented the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales and, in the case of assessment conducted in the Welsh language, QAA's guidelines on effective practice have been addressed in the Institute's Welsh Language Scheme.

155 In respect of revisions to the *Code of practice*, the review team saw many instances of these having been taken into consideration in the Institute's regulations or procedures. The team found that staff were making appropriate use of the various elements of the Academic Infrastructure, including programme specifications, and also saw evidence of professional and occupational standards being used as reference points in programme design. It therefore concluded that the Institute was making appropriate use of external reference points in its internal quality assurance processes. The annual revision of the Academic Quality Handbook was clearly instrumental in ensuring that any new developments were communicated and implemented.

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

156 The Institute's plans for the enhancement of quality and maintenance of standards centre on the development of its academic staff, the development of its academic programmes, and the enhancement of student support systems. The review team concluded that these plans were appropriate and reflected both continuous and initiative-driven improvements that were related to appropriate strategies with definite targets and timescales for achievement.

The reliability of information

157 Information about the Institute and its programmes is available to students in the form of prospectuses and various institutional or programme handbooks. Much of the information is published on the Institute's website, as well as in printed form, and, as a matter of policy, much is published in Welsh, as well as in English. A newly formed editorial board oversees the publication of all Institute and school promotional material, providing institutional authorisation for the publications within its remit with regard to accuracy, consistency of style and compliance with the Institute's Welsh Language Scheme.

158 The SWS and discussions with students who had made use of the various information materials corroborated for the review team that information was generally accurate, clear and comprehensive and, in the case of collaborative provision, explained the partner's relationship with the Institute. The team concluded that the Institute had implemented a robust system to ensure that reasonable reliance could be placed on the accuracy, reliability and completeness of the information it publishes or authorises to be published using its name.

The utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations and to act on these to enhance quality and standards

159 The review team considered the SED to be clear and comprehensive. It was explicitly referenced to supporting documentation, although references were not always to the most relevant source to illustrate the process of reflection underpinning final documents. The SED was detailed and helpful in its coverage of the development of the current quality assurance framework, linking this to the Institute's responses to devolution arrangements within the University of Wales and to previous QAA reports. In particular, it explained clearly the rationale for recent changes to academic management structures and quality assurance procedures. The promotion of synergy between research,

scholarship and teaching, and the strengthening of the management of quality and standards at school level were strong themes. In summary, the SED provided a good platform for the review, enabling the team to ask appropriate questions to test whether processes and policies were understood by staff and working effectively to deliver enhancement of the quality of teaching and of the broader student experience.

Features of good practice

160 The following features of good practice were noted:

i   the model for building multi-faceted employer links which afford a variety of benefits, including employer involvement in curriculum design and staff development opportunities (paragraph 81)

ii   the ready access students have to academic and personal support, which is facilitated by the commitment of staff in enabling students to achieve the most from their learning experience (paragraphs 97, 106 and 110).

Recommendations for action by the institution

161 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

i   to introduce greater formality into the operation of the committee system, particularly with regard to reporting and communication between committees and to ensuring that sub-groups have a clear remit, line of responsibility and timescale for reporting (paragraphs 26, 57, 78 and 94)

ii   to develop systematic mechanisms at institution level for managing the dissemination of good practice identified within schools, including monitoring its wider implementation and evaluating its impact (paragraphs 43, 54 and 58)

iii   to adopt a more strategic approach to

planning for learning resource requirements in the context of the ongoing process of curriculum renewal (paragraph 100)

iv   to formulate an institutional strategy for collaborative activity, in order to provide a framework for the development of partner links both in the UK and overseas (paragraph 115).

Appendix

North East Wales Institute of Higher Education's response to the institutional review report

NEWI welcomes the report and in particular the team's judgement that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the Institute's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and of the academic standards of the associated awards.

The review team's recognition of two areas of good practice relating to links with employers and the commitment of staff to providing students with personal and academic support is especially welcomed as these two areas are regarded by NEWI as the two most important aspects of its Vision and Mission.

The Institute acknowledges the range of very positive comments included within the body of the report including, in particular, the team's evaluation that the documentation presented for the programme validation process was the result of a thorough and iterative process (paragraph 36), and that there is an emphasis on ensuring through formal processes that staff research is underpinning the curriculum. Similarly NEWI welcomes the team's evaluation that the Annual Monitoring process was rigorous (paragraph 133), and that the Self Evaluation document was clear and comprehensive.

NEWI also acknowledges the four areas identified by the team as desirable recommendations and has already made progress to ensure that these matters are addressed in ways that will allow the Institute to enhance further its existing systems for the management of quality and standards.

NEWI would wish to thank the review team for their helpful and constructive engagement with the institution.