



# **Outcomes from Institutional review in Wales**

## **Part two: Institutions' arrangements for managing academic standards**



**Sharing good practice**

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### Overall summary

A review of the Institutional review reports published between October 2004 and August 2009 indicates that during this time assessment practices and policies generally contributed effectively to the security and maintenance of award standards. Most institutions were making assessment a strategic priority and in many cases this was complemented by ongoing regulatory reviews at institutional level. Some institutions were identifying key principles of assessment in their policies and practices, with the objective of achieving consistency of assessment across programmes. The reports generally noted positively the use made of grading criteria, marking processes and practices, feedback to students on assessed work, the operation of examination boards, and processes for the classification of degrees. While the reports often identified attempts to improve consistency in the application of policy in these areas, examples of inconsistency remained, and were sometimes the subject of recommendations, for example around feedback on assessment. Overwhelmingly, institutions were reported to have effective mechanisms in place to secure standards, which were underpinned by the comprehensive use of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the subject benchmark statements. Institutions also made extensive use of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*) in managing the quality and standards of their provision.

For the most part, institutions were seen to demonstrate rigorous and effective use of external examiners in the confirmation of academic standards, and their equivalence to those in place across the UK higher education sector. The review reports indicated that the roles and responsibilities of external examiners were clearly stated, that criteria for appointment were consistently applied, and that induction arrangements were in place. Expectations in relation to the structure and scope of external examiners' reports were generally found to align with the *Code of practice*, and institutions responded to such reports conscientiously. External examiners' reports were considered at institutional level and themes identified for concerted action, with accountability at programme level for ensuring that actions were taken and external examiners informed. Although certain detailed matters of implementation were raised, the reports generally endorsed the view that an effective, robust and scrupulous use of external examiners was contributing significantly to the assurance of award standards.

Institutions' engagement with specific sections of the *Code of practice* was generally strong, although a range of observations indicated that continuing vigilance was necessary to ensure that full value could be derived from the use of this reference point. In relation to the FHEQ, in most instances extensive and beneficial alignment was reported. Programme specifications were widely used, in conjunction with relevant subject benchmark statements, especially in programme approval and review procedures. The reports also noted engagement with a range of other reference points, including the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales*, and those produced by the Welsh Assembly Government and by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

Institution-level admissions policies were in place, with central monitoring of admissions data commonplace. In general, the review reports confirmed the availability of data sets of student information, with significant progress being made in relation to their range, utility, accessibility, quality, and also in relation to the

## Outcomes from Institutional review in Wales

technical support provided. Overall, the use of centrally-provided data and its analysis was effective, with both quality assurance and planning purposes being served. However in a small minority of cases full use of data sets at departmental level was found to be wanting. Institutions were reported to be committed to further improving the quality and use of the available data, with many investing resources to enhance capacity and capability in this area.

The findings of this paper align well with relevant papers from the *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers for England and Northern Ireland.

### Preface

To provide institutions and other stakeholders with access to timely information on the findings of the Institutional review process, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales has commissioned the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to produce a series of short working papers, describing features of good practice and summarising recommendations from the review reports. These are published under the generic title *Outcomes from Institutional review* (hereafter, *Outcomes...* papers).

This paper is based on the findings of the Institutional review reports published between October 2004 and August 2009. QAA has also published two series of papers under the generic title *Outcomes from institutional audit*. The first series of these papers drew on the findings of the audit reports published for England and Northern Ireland by November 2004, while the second draws on the findings of those reports published between December 2004 and August 2006.

A feature of good practice in Institutional review is considered to be a process, a practice, or a way of handling matters which, **in the context of the particular institution**, is improving, or leading to the improvement of, the management of quality and/or academic standards, and learning and teaching. *Outcomes...* papers are intended to provide readers with pointers to where features of good practice relating to particular topics can be located in the published review reports. Each *Outcomes...* paper therefore identifies the features of good practice in individual reports associated with the particular topic and their location in the Main report. Although all features of good practice are listed, in the interests of brevity not all are discussed in this paper. In the initial listing in paragraph 8, the first reference is to the numbered or bulleted lists of features of good practice at the end of each Institutional review report, the second to the relevant paragraphs in Section 2 of the Main report. Throughout the body of this paper, references to features of good practice in the Institutional review reports give the institution's name and the paragraph number from Section 2 of the Main report.

It should be emphasised that the features of good practice discussed in this paper should be considered in their proper institutional context, and that each is perhaps best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as a model for emulation.

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### **Institutions' arrangements for managing academic standards: introduction and general overview**

1 This paper is based on a review of the outcomes of the 12 Institutional review reports published between October 2004 and August 2009 (see Appendix 1, page 18). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in this series can be found at Appendix 2 (page 19).

2 The Institutional review process considered the extent to which each institution could demonstrate the capacity to secure and maintain the standards of awards, whether awarded in its own right or by the University of Wales. During this period, changes in the University of Wales resulted in a number of institutions securing degree awarding powers, and making changes to their own arrangements for managing academic standards.

3 Institutions have a range of processes which contribute to the management of academic standards. These include programme approval and review procedures, which are discussed elsewhere in this series. This paper concentrates on the four areas of review that focused explicitly on academic standards:

- assessment practices and procedures
- external examiners and their reports
- external reference points
- student admissions and progression and completion data.

4 QAA's guidance to its review teams for the first of these areas asked them to recount how assessment was approached, documented, monitored and managed in the institution, and what use had been made of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 6: Assessment of students*. Review teams were asked to comment on the appropriateness, clarity and consistency of assessment practices across the institution. They were also asked to use their findings in this area to contribute to the judgement of confidence or otherwise reached about the institution's management of quality and standards, and also to identify features of good practice or recommendations for further action.

5 In terms of external examiners and their reports, review teams were advised to describe the use made of external examiners (in both home and collaborative provision), the use of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, and the extent to which external examiners were asked to comment on the implementation of assessment policies. Teams were also asked to discuss the extent to which the self-evaluation document (SED) was accurate, and how far processes were working well and consistently, and making a positive contribution to the management of quality and standards in the institution. Once again, teams were asked to relate their findings on external examiners to their overall judgements relating to confidence.

6 In terms of external reference points, review teams were asked to describe the institution's approach to the various elements of the Academic Infrastructure (the *Code of practice, The framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications)

and the extent to which problems were identified, other reference points were used, and the extent of their application in collaborative partnerships. Review teams were then asked to analyse how far the SED was accurate, the extent to which the institution's approach to reference points was appropriate, timely and complete, and to identify any problems or examples of good practice.

7 Finally, QAA guided its review teams to consider the use made of statistical information by the institution in evaluating quality and standards, how the information was used and how it was linked to institutional admissions policies. Teams were then asked to analyse the extent to which the institution was making appropriate use of its statistical information, the use made of it in the SED, and how the institution responded to such information.

### Features of good practice

8 Consideration of the published Institutional review reports shows the following features of good practice relating to the management of academic standards:

#### Assessment practices and policies

- good strategic planning in general and, in particular, with regard to the College's mission and the needs of national bilingualism [in particular the report referred to the availability across many modules of tuition and assessment in either Welsh or English, and a bilingual mode of delivery in one school where students could choose to receive lectures, study materials, and assessments in the medium of either Welsh or English (paragraph 73)] [Trinity College, Carmarthen, paragraph 190 i; paragraphs 24, 27, 73, 137, 145 and 161]
- the mechanisms in place to maintain the academic standards of awards across partnership institutions [University of Glamorgan, paragraph 269 (first bullet point); paragraphs 82-84 and 214]

#### External examiners and their reports

- the thorough scrutiny of external examiners' reports and the clear allocation of responsibility for taking appropriate action in response [University of Wales, Aberystwyth, paragraph 103 iv; paragraph 44]
- the University's consideration of external examiner reports at institutional level [Swansea University, paragraph 208 (fourth bullet point); paragraph 62]

#### External reference points

- the development of an online database for the specification and approval of information on programmes and modules [Swansea University, paragraph 208 (second bullet point); paragraphs 39, 66 and 166]

#### Student admissions and progression and completion data

- the widespread use of management information to inform discussion at all levels, together with the adoption of the Assessment Reports on the Quality of University Examinations and other data analysis tools [Swansea University, paragraphs 208 (third bullet point); paragraphs 43 and 94-96]

- the online process accessible to all staff for the tracking of postgraduate research students [Swansea University, paragraph 208 (fifth bullet point); paragraphs 92, 96 and 133].

### Themes

#### Assessment practices and procedures

9 The Institutional review reports illustrated that, for the most part, institutions in Wales had in place assessment practices and procedures that contributed effectively to the general security and maintenance of award standards. Nonetheless, the number of reports identifying features of good practice in relation to this area (two) was significantly outweighed by the number of reports making recommendations for further action (nine).

10 Most review reports highlighted the strategic importance of assessment as an institutional priority, through the identification of teaching, learning and assessment strategies or assessment policies set out in quality handbooks. A small number of the more recent reports noted the identification of principles of assessment and their application by institutions. In two cases, learning, teaching and assessment strategies were reported to be built on the principles of validity, reliability, explicitness and fairness of assessment, with their use as benchmarks for reviewing the effectiveness of assessment also being reported. Many such strategies, policies, or related statements were described as demonstrating alignment of assessment processes with the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*. In one case, however, although the institution claimed in its SED that its assessment practices paid close attention to the *Code of practice*, no evidence was found to support this.

11 The 'enabling' regulations of the University of Wales defined minimum thresholds for award standards and procedural requirements for examinations and assessments in relevant institutions, although they did not define the assessment methodology that might be applied. Virtually all the review reports found that University of Wales' regulations were underpinned by consolidated statements of assessment regulations. In a substantial number of cases, these regulations were supplemented by documentary guidance on implementation. Similarly, most reports confirmed the ready availability and accessibility to students of regulatory and other relevant assessment and examination information. In one case, however, where regulations were being revised, time had been lost because of changes to the line of responsibility for the relevant working group, and there was no firm deadline for completion of the work. The report emphasised the need for the expeditious completion of the review exercise in this case.

12 All the review reports identified that formal structures existed to oversee the use of assessment regulations. In most institutions, Senate or its equivalent delegated detailed consideration to a dedicated committee, while in others, either Senate itself or a Senior Executive Board maintained this overview. Many reports also noted that such committees, or groups derived from them, were undertaking ongoing or regular annual reviews of assessment regulations. Some reports also identified specific instances where such reviews had led to the clarification of regulations in areas such as the treatment of borderline cases, the use of compensation, bilingual assessment,



degree classifications, and the operation of assessment in collaborative settings. In one case, the introduction of an assessment strategy was accompanied by changes to regulations and the appointment of a 'Change Champion' to work with academic schools. Such concerted mechanisms were commented upon favourably in two reports, but the absence of a composite overview of the operation of assessment regulations, policies and procedures was thought in need of remedy in a third, to ensure consistency in assessment. Other reports noted the slowness of changes brought about as the result of regulatory reviews. One report, for an institution considering changes in this area, identified difficulty among students in understanding aspects of assessment regulations, and recommended that such regulations be kept under review, taking note of practice in the wider higher education sector.

13 The review reports confirmed general requirements for the use of assessment criteria and for their availability to students. The formulation of such criteria was often aided by the existence of institutional frameworks, guidance and requirements for approval from external examiners. Some reports, however, highlighted concerns. These related to the variations that were allowed between disciplines in marking criteria, the quality of advice offered to staff and students, and module and assessment information for students where modules were offered for study at more than one level. In this last case, intended learning outcomes were not always differentiated between levels, and a single marking scheme was used. The report recommended that the institution ensure that intended learning outcomes and assessments in module descriptors were appropriate to the level or levels at which the module was specified. In the two instances where students were reported to express a view, they were generally satisfied with the publication of assessment criteria, but thought that there was scope for improving the links made with feedback on submitted work, or the clarity of information used to help predict progression or award decisions.

14 Matters relating to the marking of student work were also discussed in all of the review reports. Requirements for double marking were confirmed in a number of reports, with generic marking criteria and school-level marking policies also highlighted. Standard assessment regulations, procedures, practices and criteria were usually found to be fully applicable to collaborative as well as home provision, and moderation of marking was in place. Good practice was found in one institution's use of cross-moderation events between partner and faculty staff, which were seen to help assure the effective use of defined marking and moderation protocols. Further, these events acted as a forum for the discussion of joint curriculum and other academic developments [University of Glamorgan, paragraph 82]. Half the reports, however, highlighted areas of concern relating to the marking of student work. These related to variations in the implementation and sustainability of double marking policy, the inconsistent use of mark scales, variations in school-level marking policies, internal institutional concerns about a lack of appropriate criterion referencing in some schools, and external examiner comments on variability in marking. In one case, the report noted that such deficiencies or inconsistencies in marking practice had the potential to undermine the equitable and fair treatment of students.

15 Some review reports noted that a variety of assessment-related matters had a particular impact on students pursuing joint programmes of study. These matters included those regarding the comparability of demand placed upon such students,

the impact of variability in feedback on assessed work, and the need for programme specifications with distinctive aims for joint programmes. In one instance it was reported that cross-school working on examining boards, the use of programme specifications for joint studies and the involvement of external examiners were helping to mitigate the potential difficulties arising from differences between schools in assessment criteria and Pass marks for students on such programmes.

16 Four review reports addressed matters relating to situations where assessment was not in the same language as tuition. Several reports confirmed the use of QAA's *Guidelines for higher education institutions in Wales for effective practice in examining and assessing in a language other than the language of tuition*. In this context, the availability of a central database of bilingual external examiners provided by the University of Wales was highlighted. The delivery in another institution of bilingual module tuition and assessment in either language was considered to be an important development in meeting the varied needs of national bilingualism and was linked to a feature of good practice [Trinity College, Carmarthen, paragraph 73]. In another case, however, institutional guidance in this area was reported to be inconsistent, and this led the report to recommend a review of the information provided to students on assessment in Welsh, in order to ensure its sufficiency and accuracy. In the final, rather different, case it was considered satisfactory that tuition and assessment in a language other than English or Welsh was undertaken and supported, in a collaborative partner, by home institution academic staff and external examiners who were competent speakers of the language in question.

17 Consistency of policy application was discussed in relation to the treatment of plagiarism in several review reports. Thus, one report noted that the institution had identified concerns relating to variations in the robustness of procedures for checking for, and dealing with, cases of plagiarism. In a second report, although the institutional guidance on, and response to, plagiarism was found to be competent and sufficiently robust, variation in the application of policy at programme level was noted. In the third report, departments were encouraged to use plagiarism detection software, but concerns were expressed by some external examiners about the consistency with which policy and procedures on this topic were understood and implemented in academic departments. The report considered that the institution would be better able to monitor the operation of procedures, in this and other areas, if the minutes of examining boards were lodged centrally and formally reported to the relevant executive body.

18 Other matters of policy implementation also reflected upon institutional oversight and consistency of practice. In a positive vein, two review reports noted central guidance aimed at establishing a balanced volume of assessment in relation to credit value across modules or academic units. Less positive was the need, identified in one report, for mechanisms for securing the equitable and consistent treatment of all candidates with respect to the accreditation of their prior learning. Equity of treatment for students was also the context for the identification in two reports of the need for institutional guidelines regarding viva voce examinations at undergraduate level. In one case this resulted in a recommendation that the institution review its approach in order to ensure consistency in the criteria for the use of such examinations.

19 Feedback to students on their assessed work was an implementation matter that was discussed in most of the review reports. Some reports restricted their observations to recording the generally positive views of students, including those on the link between teaching, assessment and feedback. Other reports, however, identified concerns with respect to the implementation of institutional policy, and the timeliness and quality of the feedback available. In two of these cases the matter was considered to be sufficiently serious and/or widespread to precipitate recommendations. In one case, the report noted widespread variations in the timeliness with which assessed work was returned to students, and also in the quality of feedback offered. This variability of practice also extended to a partner organisation and to the institution's open learning provision. The report recommended that the institution deal with such inconsistencies by establishing '...policies and systems to ensure the timely and effective provision of feedback to students [on] their assessed work, irrespective of their place and mode of study'. In a second case, the report recommended that the institution 'ensure feedback on assessments is provided in a clear, consistent and timely manner'.

20 Central to assessment and the security of standards is the operation of examining boards and the administrative support that they, and the processes that surround them, receive. This topic was covered by all but one of the review reports, albeit briefly in some. Many noted the existence of two-tier arrangements, where module outcomes were considered at a separate board to progression and award decisions. Both types of board were noted to include representation by external examiners. In four reports there was specific mention of the administrative support provided by central registries to examination boards, in relation to assessment practice and data on outcomes. The reports also highlighted central support provided to boards, including central staff attendance at examination boards, an annual review of the operation of boards and the existence of a dedicated task group to deal with cases where students with similar levels of performance were dealt with differently by separate departments. Individual reports indicated that levels of central oversight of boards were increasing, that examining board practice was well understood by staff, and that devolution of responsibility to schools was working well. One report noted that a single body had responsibility for the oversight of boards' compliance with institutional guidance and the formal conferment of awards. This body was noted to have the capacity to challenge and overturn board decisions if this should ever prove necessary.

21 While two review reports indicated that the frameworks for ensuring consistency in the determination of degree classifications had improved, two others made recommendations on this topic. One concentrated on an absence of minimum threshold marks before compensation or condonation could be applied and a lack of designated core modules, which meant that some students could graduate without demonstrating the complete achievement of the programme learning outcomes. The second report identified a variance between central policy and one academic school's practices in relation to the calculations made for Pass and honours degrees, and recommended that the institution reflect on whether its regulations were being applied consistently and in a manner that ensured the fair and equitable treatment of all students.

22 Matters relating to the treatment of the mitigating/extenuating circumstances presented by students were also discussed in the review reports. The reports described how three institutions addressed such matters in distinctive ways, illustrating varying levels of central intervention, but with the shared objective of improving consistency across the institution. One report outlined a centralised system in which a student affairs panel considered, among other things, all individual cases, and made recommendations to examining boards on the measures to be taken. A second report highlighted a devolved system in which special circumstances committees operated at a school level, with their outcomes being received by the relevant school examining boards. The third report described how an institution had provided central policy and a suggested template for consideration, but allowed schools to respond to local needs in relation to, for example, vocationally-based assessed work and the matter of deadline extensions.

23 Notwithstanding the number of recommendations linked to assessment, the majority of reports endorsed the effectiveness of the mechanisms in place in institutions and their operation in relation to assuring assessment practices and policies, and their contribution to the security of award standards. There were no instances in any of the reports where lack of engagement with the relevant sections of the *Code of practice* was recorded and, likewise, there were no instances of recorded deviations from the requirements of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

### External examiners and their reports

24 The Institutional review reports found that institutions in Wales were rigorous and effective in their use of external examiners and that this provided confirmation of the standard of the awards conferred. Features of good practice were identified in two reports, while recommendations were made in three reports.

25 This is an area where arrangements have been affected by the changing relationship between the University of Wales and other institutions. Some of the earlier review reports referred to a requirement to report to the University of Wales matters of interest raised by external examiners. Later reports in the cycle, for institutions that were delivering University of Wales awards, noted no such requirement, reflecting the changed relationship. Many reports described the importance attached by institutions to the role of external examiners in relation to the security of standards. In one case, they were described as indispensable to the monitoring and maintenance of the academic standards of awards; in another case they were reported to be relied upon heavily for the assurance of academic standards; in a further case they were seen as a crucial part of the process for the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of provision, and elsewhere as a significant part of assuring quality and standards. A number of reports noted that institutional expectations in this area had been influenced by the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*.

26 In most institutions, criteria for the approval of newly nominated external examiners were formally stated, in order to ensure their independence and expertise. In a few cases, formal approval of nominations was given by senior individuals in the institution, such as deans or the chairs of institutional learning and teaching committees, but in most cases this approval rested with relevant senior academic

committees. Several reports explicitly noted that such bodies reserved the right to refuse approval should a candidate be deemed unsuitable. Two reports noted special arrangements in relation to the appointment of external examiners for programmes delivered through the medium of Welsh. In the first, the institution was exempt from the usual rules prohibiting the appointment of external examiners from elsewhere in the University of Wales, although this was subject to oversight by Academic Board, and more than one external examiner was appointed, where necessary, to cover the English and Welsh elements of a programme. The second report noted that 'associate examiners' could be appointed for assessment in Welsh, provided that it could be demonstrated that they had had no contact with the students being assessed.

27 Most review reports identified that institutions formally stated the roles and responsibilities of their external examiners, as part of their regulatory frameworks. An important part of such a framework, as recognised by most review reports, was the handbook or other briefing material made available to all external examiners at the time of their appointment. Many reports also identified the parties with specific responsibility for ensuring that such information was shared with external examiners. Most reports highlighted the mechanisms used by institutions to induct external examiners to their duties and to the institutional context. Such mechanisms included visits to, and briefing from, departments or schools, and a two-part briefing by the programme leader and central institutional staff. The majority of reports, however, identified centrally-organised induction days as the mechanism of choice. While two reports noted continuing attempts to optimise attendance at such events, a third indicated the availability of individual briefings for those unable to attend the scheduled institutional induction session.

28 All the review reports confirmed that external examiners provided reports apparently on an annual basis. In most cases, external examiners were guided in the preparation of their reports by a template provided by the institution, which prompted comment on a range of relevant matters, including marking standards, adherence to assessment regulations or procedures, standards of student attainment, confirmation of approval of examinations or assessments, and standards of awards. Occasionally, the reports also confirmed that reporting templates reflected the advice of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*.

29 Attention was drawn by a small number of review reports, however, to the variable content of external examiners' reports and the consequent patchy detail provided in some areas. More serious concern was expressed in one report where the prompts provided to external examiners for the preparation of reports were advisory in nature and this appeared to coincide with wide variations in the scope and level of detail in the reports submitted by them. This lack of consistency, particularly in relation to the confirmation of comparability of standards, prompted a recommendation for the introduction of a standard report form which met more closely the expectations of the *Code of practice*.

30 The receipt and initial consideration of external examiners' reports, centrally, by one or more senior members of the institution was noted in all but two of the review reports, which, by contrast, indicated that initial consideration was conducted within schools or faculties. In all cases, academic units were expected to consider and

respond to external examiner reports and to this initial central consideration. A small number of reports noted that the response from the academic unit was incorporated into an institutional response or was supplemented by an overview report. One report endorsed the establishment of a personal response to the external examiner as an expectation, where none had existed previously.

31 Most of the review reports identified the ways in which academic units responded to external examiners' reports and relayed their responses to the institution. Although, in general, these arrangements were found to be satisfactory, the adequacy of response was the focus of comment in a small number of cases. Thus, one report noted internal institutional concerns regarding variations in how different academic units responded to external examiners' reports. In a second, an inconsistent approach to responding to such reports, deficiencies in the identification of matters for institutional attention, and deficiencies in the monitoring of actions arising from responses contributed collectively to a recommendation to improve institutional oversight and management of quality and standards. A further report noted variation in the devolved procedures for addressing external examiners' reports.

32 As part of the institutional monitoring of themes arising from external examiners' comments, many review reports highlighted the receipt, by the relevant senior committees, of overview reports, which in some cases formed part of a consolidated report on assessment. In one case, the review report concurred with the institution's own assessment that this element of the annual monitoring process would benefit from a review to 'ensure that a more comprehensive analysis of all external examiner reports is undertaken...'. In another case, a recommendation resulted where summary reports contained only those matters raised by a number of external examiners, apparently without regard to the significance of the matters raised, and examining board minutes were not monitored at institutional level. In two further cases, the reporting procedure was judged to lack the capacity to fully support thorough evaluation at school level, and plans to ensure that faculty responses to external examiners were reported to the relevant central committee were considered prudent.

33 Against this, however, both features of good practice identified in relation to this topic noted the serious consideration of external examiners' reports by the institution. One review report noted that matters raised by external examiners were debated and informed future policy development. This thorough scrutiny, and the clear allocation of responsibility for taking appropriate action in response, was found to be a feature of good practice [University of Wales, Aberystwyth, paragraph 44]. The second report found that the 'thorough, systematic and detailed manner' in which the institution considered external examiners' reports constituted another feature of good practice [Swansea University, paragraph 62]. Other reports noted careful discussion of the external examiners' reports in academic units and at the institutional level.

34 In all but one case with exceptional circumstances, most review reports indicated that the arrangements for the involvement of external examiners in collaborative provision were the same as for in-house provision. One report noted the positive views of collaborative partners with respect to their interaction with external examiners, while another found that collaborative partner staff were among those trained as institutional examining board chairs. A number of reports described

arrangements for the appointment of external examiners for research degrees, which were generally handled separately from those for taught programmes. One report, however, found that an institution had strengthened its arrangements in this area by making a single institutional-level committee responsible for the oversight of external examining of both taught and research degrees.

### External reference points

35 For the most part, the Institutional review reports found that institutions were making use of external reference points, most notably the Academic Infrastructure maintained on behalf of the sector by QAA. One report identified a feature of good practice linked to this topic, while three others made recommendations in this area.

36 Most of the review reports noted that senior deliberative committees took an oversight of some or all reference points used in the institution. One report noted strength in this area, and that the institution had, through its central committee, 'a suitable mechanism for dealing with revisions to the *Code of practice* and for maintaining the consistency of its procedures with the relevant sections'. On the other hand, a small number of reports identified some deficiency of oversight in this area. In one case, although an institution had invited departments to consider alignment with sections of the *Code of practice*, it did not appear to have considered the purpose of the *Code of practice* or reflected on its own practices, nor had it sought to review engagement at departmental level. This contributed to a wider recommendation on the need to develop deliberative structures and management systems to enable an effective oversight of quality and standards.

37 All the review reports included examples of how consideration of the *Code of practice* had influenced internal policies and practices, confirming institutions' general responsiveness to this reference point. As a result of such considerations, examples were found of new deliberative structures being established, internal guidance documents being revised, new policy statements being produced, or existing ones revised and procedures refined. This generally positive view was, however, qualified in some reports. Minor qualifications included institutional uncertainty surrounding the scope of the *Code of practice*, *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* and the need for action to ensure that the expectations of various other sections of the *Code of practice* were fully met. One institution was found to be slow in the consideration of some revised sections of the *Code of practice*, while another was encouraged to address the alignment of its processes with the section on collaborative provision with 'appropriate urgency'. A third institution was found to be missing potential development opportunities for staff in consideration of the *Code of practice*, where staff awareness and knowledge of it was inconsistent.

38 Evidence drawn from throughout the review reports illustrated the variety of ways in which institutions made use of the *Code of practice*. Nearly half of the reports noted the use of the *Code of practice*, *Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, especially to provide help in setting the academic standards of research degrees and where it was being used as a benchmark in the annual internal review of an institution's postgraduate activity. Most of the reports confirmed the use of the *Code of practice*, *Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review* (or its revised version) in the

design, operation and evaluation of the internal procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of programmes of study. Similarly most reports endorsed the use of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* in the operation of effective external examiner involvement in the examination and assessment of students.

39 Of the four review reports that addressed the use of the *Code of practice, Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters*, three reported full engagement. Although other sections of the *Code of practice* received only occasional mention in the reports, in all cases this was to note positively their use. A few reports indicated the involvement of institutional staff in the formulation of elements of the Academic Infrastructure, including the *Code of practice*, and most reports confirmed that institutions were well able to respond to the *Code of practice* and to take its precepts into account.

40 The review reports confirmed the use by institutions of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales* in programme design, approval, monitoring and review. Some reports indicated, too, that external examiners were explicitly required to make use of the FHEQ. While most reports endorsed institutions' full use of this reference point, in one case it was recommended that a more systematic use of the FHEQ would be helpful in the 'critical differentiation of module specifications and the development of generic assessment criteria'.

41 The comprehensive production and availability of programme specifications was noted by most of the review reports, including some cases where specifications had been produced for joint honours programmes. Coverage was found to be limited in one case, however, where only slow progress was being made towards the production of specifications for all programmes, and this was linked to the recommendation noted in the paragraph above. In another case, consideration by the institution of the purpose of programme specifications was encouraged. By contrast, one report identified good practice in the development of an online database of programme specifications, for use by staff when making amendments to programmes, and to help inform student choice of programmes and modules [Swansea University, paragraph 66]. In many cases, programme specifications were guided by an institutional template, the absence of which led to an encouragement to adopt such an approach in one report.

42 Some review reports noted the direct reference made to subject benchmark statements in the formulation of programme specifications. The majority of the reports emphasised that the consideration of these statements formed part of the procedure for the approval of new programmes. Similarly, programme specifications were also identified by most reports as being part of the necessary documentation considered during programme approval. Exceptionally, two reports indicated that programme specifications were not required in advance of a programme approval event, but rather, were produced as an outcome of it. In addition, one report noted variations in staff knowledge and understanding of mapping exercises, and in the use of programme specifications. This led to a recommendation to adopt a more consistent and comprehensive approach to implementing them. Elsewhere, the annual monitoring and periodic review of programmes were also identified as



opportunities to engage with subject benchmark statements and programme specifications, in the definition of programmes, their standards and their continuing validity. A few reports observed that external examiners were required to consider the subject benchmark statements in their deliberations.

43 The review reports also described positive engagement with a wide range of reference points outside the Academic Infrastructure. These included those published by QAA, including: *Guidelines for higher education institutions in Wales for effective practice in examining and assessing in a language other than the language of tuition*; and *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*. Other reference points used included the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales*, Welsh Assembly Government circulars, the requirements of the National Health Service in Wales and those of the Welsh Language Board. Some reports noted positive engagement with the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and the value placed upon them by institutions in the confirmation of the standards of their awards. Finally, two reports noted engagement with international reference points in the Diploma Supplement and the 'Dublin descriptors'.

### **Student admissions and progression and completion data**

44 The Institutional review reports indicated that institutions in Wales had admissions policies in place and made use of student progression and completion data in a variety of ways. Two features of good practice were identified in one report while recommendations were made in four reports. All features of good practice and recommendations related to the use of progression and completion data, rather than to admissions.

45 The review reports demonstrated that admissions policies were in place in most institutions, with annual student-related data sets being produced and monitored centrally. In most cases, these data sets included admissions data. One report noted that the institution's system had no capacity to follow students with defined characteristics beyond their cohort membership and, indeed, this capacity was not noted in any of the other reports either.

46 The data sets described in the review reports, in addition to containing admissions-related information, covered a range of other topics relevant to students, including progression, completion, assessment and degree outcomes. A small number of reports noted the inclusion of entry qualification data in such sets. The effectiveness of institution-level consideration of student progression/completion/awards data was noted positively in most reports with matters relating to student retention rates being important in a significant number of these considerations.

47 The fundamental quality and scope of the data produced was only questioned in a small number of review reports, including one where it was noted that data was generated from a variety of sources and was not subject to concerted analysis. In another case, where there were some questions about data accuracy, and where the institution recognised that a multiplicity of data sources could be confusing, the report recommended the prioritisation of new management information systems and associated processes. Another report noted slow progress towards the implementation of an effective Management Information System and the lack of a clear strategy for

the use of statistical data, and recommended that the institution expedite progress and ensure the capacity of the system to provide an appropriate range of data to inform the oversight of quality and standards. In contrast, however, two features of good practice were identified in one report where statistical data were extensively available, integrated and used in quality management, strategic decision making and the monitoring of assessment outcomes. In addition, the online process for the tracking of postgraduate research students constituted a further feature of good practice [Swansea University, paragraphs 92, 94, 95 and 96].

48 For the most part, student-related data sets were effectively used at institutional and departmental levels. Most review reports highlighted the effective use of systematic student-related data sets in annual monitoring procedures, with only two instances where it was reported that the effective and evaluative use of such statistics varied between academic units. In most cases, student-related and other data was being used, not only to help assure quality and standards, but also to support institutional planning decisions, and other types of data were also noted, including costs per student, student staff ratios and research income by department. Institutions were also committed to continuing the ongoing development of their capacity in this area with many identifying current and future investment to effect such improvements. That such commitment was bringing about noticeable improvement was noted in several of the reports.

### Conclusions and comparative review

49 A consideration of the Institutional review reports indicates that most institutions in Wales have strong arrangements for managing the academic standards of their awards. The conclusions reached during the course of this paper are broadly aligned with those arising from the following *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers for England and Northern Ireland:

- Assessment of students
- External examiners and their reports
- The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Subject benchmark statements
- Programme specifications
- Recruitment and admission of students
- Progression and completion statistics.

50 In this paper and its counterparts for England and Northern Ireland assessment practices were found, in the most part, to be consistent and fair to students and to make a positive contribution to the assurance of award standards. Similarly, there was a common theme of institutions moving toward strengthening the reliability and consistency of assessment arrangements. However, there were shared concerns about the variability in arrangements that was permitted or tolerated by some institutions.

51 Papers for both sectors identify a trend toward greater uniformity across institutions in the processes to determine degree classification, although this paper does not identify the discretion exercised by examination boards as a key matter of concern for institutions in Wales. Although in general, examination boards were seen to operate well, opportunities for improvement in the feedback given to students on assessed work were identified, with many institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland still grappling with the matter.

52 Both this paper and the relevant papers in the *Outcomes from institutional audit* series find strength in the use of external examiners, including the role they performed and procedures for appointment, reporting, responding to reports, monitoring of overviews, and use in annual monitoring of programmes. Although in England and Northern Ireland the matter of the clarity of the authority vested in external examiners arose, this is not a major theme identified for Wales, where a strong culture of centralised briefing of external examiners appeared to be in place. However, both this paper and its counterpart note that a minority of reports identified the inadequacy of external examiner report templates designed wholly around so-called tick boxes.

53 A strong use of the Academic Infrastructure, and programme specifications in particular, was identified for both sectors, with the uniformity of approach to the preparation of programme specifications being highlighted. However, the variable purposes to which programme specifications are put, noted in the paper for England and Northern Ireland, is not replicated in this paper, as in Wales the single predominant purpose was the use made of them in the processes surrounding new programme approvals. Both this paper and its counterparts note the extensive use of the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements during processes for programme approval and review. This paper also notes engagement with a range of other reference points, including those published by the Welsh Assembly Government and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

54 The conclusion reached in the *Outcomes from institutional audit* paper on recruitment and admissions, relating to the apparently limited influence the *Code of practice* has had on admissions practices is not a feature of the current paper, although there was no mention of the relevant section of the *Code of practice* in any of the later reports. However, both papers highlight the extensive availability and use made of admissions-related statistics by institutions.

55 In relation to the use made of progression and completion data, the matter of unclear definitions arising in the *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers is not identified in this present paper. This paper does note variability in the capacity of institutions to use such data as the foundation of their quality assurance processes. Notwithstanding this variability, which may reflect the extended period covered by this paper, it appears that in virtually all institutions the provision of central data and analytical tools were in place, with a growing capacity to provide trustworthy and useful data and information. Thus, the findings of this current paper appear to be in line with those of its counterparts in identifying the development of fully integrated information management systems as an emerging feature. Papers for both sectors identify that institutions were making steady progress in this important area.

## **Appendix 1: The Institutional review reports**

The Institutional review reports considered in these papers are listed below.

University of Wales

University of Wales, Newport

Trinity College, Carmarthen<sup>1</sup>

North East Wales Institute of Higher Education<sup>2</sup>

University of Wales, Bangor<sup>3</sup>

University of Wales, Aberystwyth<sup>4</sup>

University of Wales, Lampeter

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Swansea University

Cardiff University

University of Glamorgan

Swansea Metropolitan University

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<sup>1</sup> Now Trinity University College

<sup>2</sup> Now Glyndŵr University

<sup>3</sup> Now Bangor University

<sup>4</sup> Now Aberystwyth University

## Appendix 2: Methodology

The analysis of the Institutional review reports uses the headings set out in Annex H of the *Handbook for institutional review: Wales* (2003) to subdivide the Summary, Main report and Findings sections of the Institutional review reports into broad areas. An example from the Main report is 'The institution's framework for managing quality and standards, including collaborative provision'.

For each published report, the text is taken from the report published on QAA's website and converted to a word processing format. The resulting files are checked for accuracy and coded into sections following the template used to construct the Institutional review reports. The reports are then introduced into a qualitative research software package, QSR NVIVO 8®. The software provides a wide range of tools to support indexing and searching and allows features of interest to be coded for further investigation.

A review team's judgements, its identification of features of good practice, and its recommendations appear at two points in an Institutional review report: the Summary and at the end of the Findings; it is only in the latter, however, that cross references to the paragraphs in the Main report are to be found, and it is here that the grounds for identifying a feature of good practice, offering a recommendation and making a judgement are set out. These cross references have been used to locate features of good practice and recommendations to the particular sections of the report to which they refer.

Individual *Outcomes...* papers are compiled by current and former QAA staff and experienced institutional reviewers. To assist in compiling the papers, reports produced by QSR NVIVO 8® are made available to authors to provide a broad picture of the overall distribution of features of good practice and recommendations in particular areas, as seen by the review teams.

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