QAA

Outcomes from Institutional review in Wales

Part three: Institutions' arrangements for engaging with students and with the wider world

Sharing good practice

Overall summary

Consideration of the 12 Institutional review reports published between October 2004 and August 2009 suggests that institutions in Wales had effective procedures for student representation, for eliciting feedback and for dealing with student complaints and appeals. Furthermore, the reports indicated that institutions had in place policies and procedures to manage collaborative provision.

During the period covered by this study, institutions in Wales had mechanisms to ensure that students were represented in decision-making and deliberative fora at institutional level, usually through students' unions or similar representative bodies. While arrangements varied between institutions, students were, for the most part, represented on similar bodies at faculty, school, departmental or programme levels. Levels of success in representation sometimes varied at faculty and school levels or for particular categories of student. Students' views were frequently taken into account in quality assurance processes. Student representative bodies were found to play an important role in the success of such arrangements, in particular in identifying and training student representatives. Some institutions were found to be making special arrangements to ensure that postgraduate research students were properly represented.

Institutions' arrangements for collecting and analysing student feedback and for responding to it were found to be strong, with much use being made of questionnaires at module, programme and service department level, and strategic use being made of the National Student Survey results. Feedback was collected from all categories of students, including distance learners and those at partner institutions. 'Closing the loop' by informing students of actions taken in response to feedback was an area identified in the reports in need of some development. Examples of good practice in the use of employer views were identified in a number of reports. The collection and use of feedback from graduates, however, was at an early stage of development, and lacked strategic direction.

Although student complaints and appeals procedures were undergoing some change at the time these review reports were published, they were generally described in positive terms. For the most part procedures were clear and logical, and were subject to careful monitoring within the institution. Formal procedures were often balanced by an emphasis on informal approaches, in order to achieve a speedy resolution to matters of concern, and student representative bodies once again played an important and positive role. While institutions on the whole had careful arrangements to make students aware of procedures in this area, a number of opportunities for improvement (most of them small scale) were identified.

Large-scale collaborative provision is concentrated in a small number of institutions in Wales. The review reports found some strength in institutions' collaborative arrangements at operational level, particularly with regard to building relationships and communications with partners, and a number of features of good practice were identified in this regard. However, a significant proportion of all the reports made recommendations regarding the extent to which institutions were able to take an oversight of collaborative activity, and provide strategic direction for it. The reports also noted the need for consistency in the definition and application of processes

associated with partner approval, monitoring and review, with assessment and with information for students.

The findings of this paper compare closely with the findings of relevant papers in the *Outcomes from institutional audit* series covering institutions in 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 6, 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 engaging with students and with the wider world: 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 20). A note on the methodology used to produce this and other papers in this series can be found at Appendix 2 (page 21).

2   Students have an increasingly important role in the quality assurance arrangements of higher education institutions, throughout the UK. In Wales, Institutional review sought to examine institutions' structures and processes for ensuring that students were represented at all levels, and that feedback was collected from students, graduates and employers, analysed and acted upon, if appropriate. Where individual students have a complaint about some aspect of the quality of provision, which cannot be resolved informally, or where they wish to make an appeal about some aspect of the assessment of their work, institutions have arrangements for dealing with such eventualities, and again, Institutional review sought to examine the effectiveness of these arrangements. These investigations were normally dealt with under a number of different headings in the reports:

- Student representation at the strategic and operational level
- Feedback from students, graduates and employers
- Procedures for student complaints and appeals

3   QAA's guidance to its review teams called for an outline of the institution's arrangements in each of these areas, and of the institution's view of them, as expressed in the self-evaluation document. Teams were directed to seek student views on the effectiveness of such arrangements, and to comment upon the accuracy of the institution's view, and the extent to which arrangements or procedures were appropriate, reliable and consistently applied. They were also asked to identify any gaps or examples of good practice, and to conclude whether there was evidence of positive student contribution to the assurance of quality and standards. In the case of complaints and appeals procedures, review teams were asked to conclude whether an effective oversight was maintained by the institution.

4   The second part of this paper addresses collaborative provision, which can pose particular challenges for the management of quality and standards. Under this heading, QAA guided its review teams to summarise the nature and extent of the institution's partnerships, to identify where responsibility lay for such provision and to outline formally documented procedures, such as those for approval, monitoring and review. Teams were asked to indicate any response the institution had made to previous QAA reports on such provision and to outline the institution's own view of the effectiveness of its arrangements in this area. They were then asked to confirm whether this view was accurate, and the extent to which procedures were working well and consistently. They were asked to consider how the guidance given in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) (Code of practice, Section 2)* was being observed and to identify any gaps or examples of good practice. In summary, review teams were asked to consider whether an appropriate institutional overview was being maintained.

5   The reports of the review investigations in the above areas form the basis for this paper.

Features of good practice

6   Consideration of the published Institutional review reports shows the following features of good practice:

Student representation at the strategic and operational level

- the programme review process including the use of external and student representatives within the process [Trinity College, Carmarthen, paragraph 190 ii; paragraphs 57, 62 and 99]

- the introduction and development of an effective system of school representatives to improve communication with, and involvement of, students [University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, paragraph 166 (second bullet point); paragraphs 72 and 76]

- the arrangements established by the University to secure student involvement in quality assurance processes and institution-level committees [Cardiff University, paragraph 201 (fourth bullet point); paragraph 104]

- the strengthening of student representation, notably through the roles of the Student Representatives' Co-ordinator and Student Voice Representatives [University of Glamorgan, paragraph 269 (second bullet point); paragraphs 111, 112, 117 and 235].

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

- the many forms of external engagement offered in the student learning experience [Trinity College, Carmarthen, paragraph 190 iii; paragraphs 109, 111, 137, 141-142 and 150]

- the model for building multi-faceted employer links which afford a variety of benefits, including employer involvement in curriculum design and staff development opportunities [North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, paragraph160 i; paragraph 81]

- the work of the Careers Advisory Service in operating both the Student Skills Competition as a means of gaining feedback from employers of the students' acquisition of transferable skills and the Year in Employment Scheme [University of Wales, Aberystwyth, paragraph 103 v; paragraphs 58 to 59 and 80]

- the effective partnership between the University and the Students' Union to improve the quality of the student learning experience [Cardiff University, paragraph 201 (fifth bullet point); paragraph 108].

Collaborative provision

- the establishment of the moderators' conference to assist in supporting the work of the Validation Unit [University of Wales, paragraph 153 ii; paragraphs 98 and 99]

- the deployment of the moderator with an administrator from the Validation Unit

to ensure that moderator visits are thorough and complete [University of Wales, paragraph 153 iii; paragraph 99]

- the creation of a community around FE2HE-UWIC to enhance the experience for [higher education] students in partner colleges [University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, paragraph 166 (third bullet point); paragraph 130]

- the intent and practice of the University's commitment to widening international student mobility as part of its engagement with the Bologna Process [Swansea University, paragraph 208 (first bullet point); paragraphs 35 and 152]

- 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].

Student representation at the strategic and operational level

7   The Institutional review reports indicated that institutions in Wales generally had effective student representation arrangements, from representation at programme or departmental levels, through to representation on senior institutional committees. Features of good practice were identified in four reports, while recommendations were made in two reports.

8   It is clear that institutions in Wales took student representation at the highest levels seriously. This was usually conducted through the Students' Union or similar body. All the reports noted the representation of students on institutional-level bodies such as senates or councils. Most also referred to student membership of subsidiary committees of such top-level bodies, including those concerned with quality and standards, student services, financial hardship, and committees specifically for student affairs. Representation was also described as being conducted through other parts of the governance mechanisms, such as a Management Board or its equivalent. Another less formal approach than committee membership involved monthly meetings of senior management and Students' Union officers, alternately chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and the Students' Union President.

9   While all the review reports made reference to matters of institutional representation for students in general, some also made direct reference to the particular representative needs of postgraduate students. For example, one institution had a student representative on its Research Committee. In another example, a recently established Research Degrees Board had a Research Students Consultative Committee with broad membership. A third institution, in response to external reviews, had established a Research Students Committee which sent representatives to two higher-level committees. Elsewhere, faculty-based fora were provided for postgraduate research student representatives to meet the faculty head of research. Research student representation was not universal, however, and in one institution students were not represented on a Research Committee, while in others postgraduate students were found to have a particularly weak knowledge of representative structures. In one of these examples, the report recommended that the institution improve the representative system for postgraduate research students, both in creating independent channels of feedback and in enhancing the roles of various committees in considering the feedback provided by them.

10   Another route to student representation was via institutionally established working or project groups, and a few review reports made positive mention of these. Some reports also noted ways in which students had direct involvement in quality assurance processes. These included student involvement in boards of study, programme approval, annual monitoring, periodic and departmental reviews, school audits, and professional body accreditation and working groups. In one case, the institution's arrangements to secure student involvement in quality assurance processes (for example in programme approval and annual review and evaluation) and to secure representation on institutional-level committees, were found to be a feature of good practice, as was its partnership with the Students' Union [Cardiff University, paragraph 104]. Good practice was also found in another case, in student involvement in a programme review process [Trinity College, Carmarthen, paragraph 99].

11   At the operational level, there was less homogeneity in arrangements for student representation. There was also variation in the terminology used, both by institutions and in the review reports. Representation was sometimes conducted through staff-student consultative committees, or similar, or through programme, departmental or school committees. It is clear that, in general, there were two levels of operational representation: one that operated more directly in relation to programmes of study and one that operated at school or faculty level. Diversity of institutional committee structures and nomenclature at the latter level also complicated the overall picture.

12   Nevertheless, in some form, most review reports noted the existence of departmental or programme-level representation. In some cases, such representation was enshrined in ordinances or defined as an expectation via a quality assurance manual. Several institutions allowed some variability in precise arrangements in order to fit the circumstances of particular academic units. One institution allowed flexibility of staff-student consultative committee formation in response to the needs of varying student groups and it was clear that this mechanism was working with the approval of staff and students. The latter were able to give examples of matters raised and dealt with satisfactorily. While the reports found representation at the operational level broadly effective, variability in success was noted in some cases, notably at faculty or school levels or for sub-sets of students such as those at collaborative partners, those studying part-time, or for postgraduate research students (see above). However, some institutions were found to ensure effective representation for collaborative students at programme level by ensuring the presence of systems of representation at their partner organisations, in order to allow students to make their views known.

13   Key to successful representational systems, particularly at the highest levels, is often the institutional relationship with the Students' Union. Most reports indicated either that high-level representation was conducted via, or was actively supported by, the Students' Union and its officers. Productive relationships were supported by the kind of informal meetings noted above, and some reports observed that Students' Union representatives were treated as full committee members or as partners by the institution. Other institutions had a member of staff dedicated to liaison and generally made their students feel that they played a significant part in contributing to institutional policy and practice. In two institutions, Students' Union representatives

chaired some meetings with senior institutional staff. One of the few recommendations for action in this area concerned an institution's reliance on a single student to attend a large number of institutional committees.

14   It is clear that institutions were aware of the need to ensure the effectiveness of their representative systems and sought to enhance their arrangements in this area. Most reports described improvements to student representation systems, often involving training students so that they were better able to fulfil their representative role. Sometimes such training was either partially or completely devolved to the Students' Union; either in collaboration with the National Union of Students (Wales) or with institutional staff such as heads of faculty. Good communications with the student body were also seen as important in enhancing representation and a variety of methods for achieving this were reported. These included the publication of leaflets, student handbooks and websites. In one case, training was associated with the role of paid school representatives, established to improve school-level representation. Such representatives were reported as being enthusiastic about their role, and this was found to be a feature of good practice [University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, paragraph 72]. Another institution ran a scheme of paid 'student voice' representatives, who were able to ensure that concerns were properly taken to faculty level. The enhancement of effective student representation via these and other roles, re-invigorated and supported by an institutional Student Representative Co-ordinator, was seen to constitute a feature of good practice [University of Glamorgan, paragraph 117].

15   The review reports noted widespread awareness among students of their representation arrangements with only a few exceptions. For the most part, students and their representatives appeared to view these arrangements positively. A number of reports noted that student representation and feedback had led to beneficial changes, for example in library opening hours.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

16   The Institutional review reports found that, broadly speaking, institutions had effective ways of gathering and utilising feedback from students. Employers and other external stakeholders such as professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), were described as contributing through various mechanisms, but the use of feedback from graduates was at a rudimentary stage in many institutions. Features of good practice were identified in four reports, while recommendations were made in two reports.

17   A noticeable feature of this topic is the variety of interactions with students, graduates and employers that were discussed in the review reports. These ranged from various questionnaires, through alumni contributions to governance, and to employer involvement in transferrable skill development. There is also overlap with the previous section on student representation, another obvious way in which institutions gather feedback from their students.

18   All institutions in Wales collected feedback from their students, at the very least via their student representative systems (see previous section). The review reports also made much mention of questionnaires, particularly in connection with the monitoring of modules, and with the monitoring of central service provision. More recent review reports noted the use being made of the National Student Survey (NSS) as another

source of feedback. Institutions' responsiveness to feedback was also noted favourably in many reports, and in one case an institution's arrangements to obtain and respond to student feedback was regarded as evidence of an effective partnership between the institution and the Students' Union, in order to enhance the student learning experience [Cardiff University, paragraph 108]. Employers and other external stakeholders such as PSRBs contributed views through a wide range of mechanisms, and moves were being made in some institutions to provide central coordination for this. Much less use was made of graduates as a source of input into enhancement and there was little evidence of a strong strategic drive to coordinate activities in this area.

19   Institutions had in place feedback systems for students to evaluate modules, most often via questionnaires, although other methods, such as focus groups and staff-student consultative committees, were also mentioned in the review reports. Institutional views varied regarding the value to be placed upon consistency in administering module questionnaires. One institution's own monitoring systems had identified variability in the collection of feedback, including that collected from students at collaborative partners, and had taken action to eliminate the inconsistency. Another institution permitted programme and module questionnaires to be designed and administered at school level, while putting in place a complementary system enabling triangulation, including confirmation of the effectiveness of their arrangements through annual monitoring and review and through a questionnaire aimed at new student representatives. A further institution was refreshing its standard module evaluation form in response to student criticism of existing variety and format. Variability in feedback collection practice led to a recommendation to identify and share good practice on effective methods in this area. As well as using questionnaires to elicit feedback regarding modules, some institutions used them in connection with evaluating programmes, perhaps on exit from the institution. In one example, the exit questionnaire results were summarised into a report by the Registrar for consideration by support units and schools, who responded via their annual action plans.

20   Beyond those mechanisms aimed specifically at module and programme-level experience, a diverse range of other internal surveys was noted in the review reports. Usually these related to satisfaction levels with specific centrally-provided services, such as library or computing facilities. In some cases, it was not clear how extensive the matters covered by such surveys were, but many encompassed more than one specific service. Conversely, other questionnaires were more limited in scope, for example those directed at the first-year experience or at students' initial experience of information on entry. In two cases, formal research analysis of survey results was undertaken. Generally, the reports indicated that considerable use was being made of questionnaires to sample student views with some institutions evidently considering the possible implications of survey or questionnaire fatigue. In response, one institution was developing innovative alternative ways of collecting feedback, including one modelled upon the diary room used in TV reality programmes, and it was reported' that this had generated an enthusiastic response.

21   Most review reports described the serious way in which institutions considered results from the NSS as an additional perspective on the views of their students. For example, one institution discovered matters being revealed in the NSS that were

not being detected by its own systems. Another institution was found to be using the NSS to benchmark itself against other institutions, resulting in discussion at senate level. A few institutions had the results analysed by their educational development unit to inform discussion in senior academic committees. One recommendation made relating to student feedback noted that in attempting to manage various aspects of student feedback, including the results of the NSS, the institution had distributed specific responsibilities to a number of bodies. The report recommended that the institution 'ensure adequate coordination of the work of the various sub-groups, so that timely results are achieved'.

22   An important characteristic of student feedback systems is the way in which the institutional responses to such feedback are conveyed to students. In this regard, the review reports, taken as a whole, were less positive about the existence or use of formal mechanisms to achieve this. Several reports mentioned the opportunities for responding to students through consultative systems (see preceding section) and, less formally, through accessible and responsive staff. In one institution, while the minutes of meetings were available, students confirmed that they usually became aware of responses to feedback by seeing changes made, rather than through any systematic process. Another institution acknowledged that there was 'no formal system for routinely informing the student body of changes made as a result of their feedback…'. Other reports made little mention of this aspect.

23   A group of students who may be overlooked in terms of collecting feedback are those not physically on campus, because they are studying either through distance-learning provision, or through collaborative partners. Some review reports did mention feedback gathered specifically from students at partner institutions, particularly via module questionnaires. One report mentioned that the institution had versions of its satisfaction survey tailored to suit both distance learners and those studying at collaborative partners, as well as ensuring that both contributed to end-of-module questionnaires. By these means, the institution was able to establish that high satisfaction levels existed among its distance learners.

24   The use of feedback from graduates was at an early stage in Welsh institutions. Most review reports recorded institutional acknowledgements that the use of feedback from former students could be improved, or recorded an absence of any comment on the topic in the institutional self-evaluation document. With one exception, no reports described any kind of systematic gathering of information beyond analysis of the first destinations of leavers from higher education survey data. The exception referred to a variety of mechanisms employed to gather feedback for specific monitoring and review events and cited an example of surveying alumni as part of the input to the periodic review of a postgraduate programme. A small number of institutions were noted as having existing good communications with their alumni, but were not described as routinely using them as a source of feedback. In this context, several other reports noted institutions' intentions to improve relations with their alumni from whom feedback might be gathered.

25   The extent of the collection of feedback from employers was varied, according, for instance, to whether programmes were vocational in any way. The review reports appear to have taken a broad view of what constituted employer feedback.

For example, a feature of good practice in this area was seen in the involvement of employers in a Student Skills Competition run by a careers advisory service. This was used as a means of obtaining employer feedback on students' acquisition of transferrable skills [University of Wales, Aberystwyth, paragraphs 58 and 59]. This broad view of employer feedback was also taken elsewhere. For example, one report quoted the view expressed by the institution that 'academic schools make very considerable efforts to establish and maintain links [with employers] appropriate to their curriculum, research and other activities'.

26   The review reports sometimes provided more detailed descriptions of particular types of employer involvement, for example representation in processes for programme approval, monitoring and review. Other kinds of employer engagement included the involvement of Initial Teacher Training employers in student interviews and selection; engagement through PSRBs; the involvement of employers in work-based learning arrangements such as in Foundation Degrees or in the GO Wales [Graduate Opportunities Wales] programme, or through the representation of employers on some school advisory committees. One or two reports noted attempts to give strategic direction to this activity, for example through the establishment of an Employment, Enterprise and Third Mission Committee and a Careers and Employability Task Group which included representation from employers and the GO Wales programme. Two reports found good practice in this area. The first of these found that the institution demonstrated effective engagement with various groups of employers and other external stakeholders in order to enhance the student experience, for example through annual review, validation and quinquennial review panels, through placement learning and as visiting lecturers [Trinity College, Carmarthen, paragraph 111]. In a second report, good practice was found in an institutional 'model for building multifaceted employer links, which afford a variety of benefits, including employer involvement in curriculum design and staff development opportunities' [North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, paragraph 81].

Procedures for student complaints and appeals

27   The Institutional review reports found that overall, institutions in Wales had policies and procedures for handling student complaints and appeals that were effective. For the most part, students were found to be aware of information regarding the procedures to be followed. No features of good practice were highlighted in relation to this area, although one report did make a recommendation.

28   As a result of a recent or anticipated change in the relationship with the University of Wales, many institutions had just revised, or were considering revisions to, procedures for complaints and appeals. At the start of the review period, the University of Wales was the ultimate authority for appeals concerning its awards. Complaints were generally handled by member or associated institutions, but with an appeal possible to the University of Wales' Academic Board. Subsequently, this authority was devolved to the individual institutions. An additional factor was the publication of the revised *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters* (2007) (*Code of practice, Section 5*) and the introduction of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education. Many reports made

mention of the role of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. There is explicit mention in a few reports that, when reviewing procedures, the opportunity was taken to simplify them.

29   The review reports found that Welsh institutions had formal procedures for handling student complaints and appeals, governed by their academic regulations. The reports frequently noted that institutions considered the *Code of practice, Section 5* in the design and operation of their procedures. All the reports indicated, either explicitly or implicitly, that complaints about the quality of provision were handled separately from appeals against academic decisions. Some of the reports described the grounds upon which appeals could be made and two noted that appeals on the basis of disagreement with an academic judgement were not permitted. The reports also noted the monitoring of the operation of complaints and appeals procedures by or on behalf of a senior institutional committee. Institutions were noted to publicise their procedures to staff and students, through handbooks and websites. Many reports commented positively upon the effective management of procedures, and such conclusions were often supported in various ways by the students themselves.

30   A variety of monitoring and reporting arrangements relating to complaints and appeals were identified, but these most commonly featured a summary report presented to a senior deliberative committee on an annual basis. The source of such reports varied, depending on the exact nature of the internal bodies involved in case processing. Similarly, the body reported to also varied, but when reporting was described, the description was generally of the institution being made corporately aware and thus able to take action if necessary. The importance of this central perspective is illustrated by an example where an institution was able to identify exceptional mitigating circumstances as contributing to an increase in appeals, and took action in response. Another institution identified an increase in unsuccessful appeals, and set up a working group to consider such matters, including the clarity with which complaints and appeals procedures were distinguished for students. A further institution, noting an increase in complaints and appeals, albeit still a small number, had appointed a Compliance Officer to better cope with processing and to help ensure consistency of treatment.

31   Most review reports referred directly to the encouragement or use of informal methods of dispute resolution as a means of reducing the number of cases taken through formal routes. Such informal methods appear to have been valued by institutions and students: one report noted the institution's wish to build upon strength in its 'long established informal system'. Another report depicted students as being 'generally of the opinion that many minor matters could be satisfactorily resolved informally by virtue of readily accessible and responsive staff', although some difference of understanding was evident as to how complaints were defined as formal and informal. A third report noted that the institution regarded the informal stage as offering an opportunity to resolve matters as quickly as possible.

32   A substantial number of review reports made reference to the positive role of the Students' Union in supporting complaints and appeals procedures. In one institution, the Students' Union was described as having both formal and informal

roles and the latter was said by students to be an aid in the resolution of complaints. In another institution the Students' Union was, with the encouragement of senior staff, enhancing its ability to support students through complaint and appeal cases, and developing a complaints database. In a further institution, informal resolution involving the Students' Union was noted as having reduced the number of cases that were processed formally. Where good relations existed between the Students' Union and the Academic Registrar's office, this contributed to an institutional strength in this area, especially in the steps taken to ensure that students were clearly informed of their rights and responsibilities, and the procedures to be used. One report noted the role of the president of the Student's Union as a member of a final complaints appeal panel.

33   Students were reported as being made aware of the procedures associated with complaints and appeals via a variety of routes, both printed and online. Literature often included institutional handbooks or student-orientated guides to regulations, which were usually given to students on entry. In one case, the review report explicitly noted that procedural information was available in Welsh as well as in English. The institution concerned also intended to make explicit the students' right to conduct in Welsh their part in any hearing. Most reports also made mention of web-based links to a variety of relevant information, including the institutional regulations. All but two reports confirmed, directly or by implication, that students knew where to find out about complaints and appeals procedures should the need arise. In one case, an institution planned to deal with a lack of awareness of the correct procedures among staff at school level through a training event.

34   Notwithstanding this generally positive picture of student awareness, the provision of information to students was the one area of this topic where reservations were expressed by some review reports. The only recommendation in this area concerned a complex process involving literature that students found difficult to understand. In another report, students suggested that weblinks between the central administration web pages and the 'student zone' be improved. Some reports noted inaccuracies or confusion in the information provided, in one case regarding the extent to which non-finalists could appeal to Senate, and in the other on the precise location of regulations on an appeals/verification procedure. In one case, the student written submission noted that students sometimes found it difficult to find information on complaints and appeals, but a majority of students who met the review team regarded information as accessible. In a final case, a partner handbook failed to make clear that appeals were to be conducted under the procedures of the higher education institution involved, rather than those of the partner itself.

Collaborative provision

35   The Institutional review reports provided a mixed picture of Welsh institutions' management of their collaborative provision. Features of good practice were linked to this theme in four reports; however, there were recommendations in eight reports.

36   One noticeable feature of collaborative provision in Wales at the time the review reports were published was the diversity of institutional mission with regard to such provision. An obvious overarching factor was the role played by the University of

Wales and its very large-scale involvement in this area. Beyond that, two other institutions had a large and long-established range of collaborations ranging from domestic post-compulsory education and training through to overseas provision. At the other end of the spectrum, one institution had very limited collaborative provision. In a few cases, while the amount of such provision was not large and complex at the time of review, the intention was to increase it. There was less mention in the reports of collaborative provision at postgraduate level, especially connected to research, than at undergraduate level. It should be noted that collaborative provision could be complex, in that it included a wide range of different types of collaboration, without registered student numbers being large in absolute terms. Other than award-bearing provision, the picture is extended by the inclusion of a variety of exchange, facilitation and continuing professional development arrangements that were also dealt with under this heading in the reports.

37   Reflecting the small volume of collaborative provision in some Welsh institutions, a few review reports noted that strategy in this area was at an early stage of development and three recommended that strategies be established to provide a framework for further development. The reports provided a mixed view of the effectiveness of the oversight of collaborative provision. Some reports described oversight as being led by an institutional-level committee. There was some mention of specific administrative units dedicated to providing support for this kind of provision, while in other cases support was described as an explicit responsibility of Academic Registry. In one case, an institution had decided to strengthen its Collaborative Provision Office in the light of an extensive review of its provision. On the other hand, a committee responsible for the oversight of overseas collaborations in another institution was not complemented by a body performing a similar role for UK partnerships or for collaborative provision as a whole, and the report recommended that the institution reflect on how oversight might be better achieved. Weakness of some or all aspects of the central oversight of collaborative provision occasioned recommendations in a considerable number of reports.

38   A characteristic of collaborative provision that can lead to some difficulties for institutional oversight is the manner in which various components of monitoring and review processes are devolved to faculties or lower-level academic groupings. For example, in a system where general quality management responsibilities, including annual monitoring, were delegated to schools, the report noted that this had the potential to reduce the visibility of collaborative provision. This contributed to a recommendation to review procedures and policies concerned with the management of collaborative provision. Lack of clarity in defining the nature of collaborations was a further contributory factor. In another case, a more significant lack of institutional oversight contributed to a recommendation that the institution review its capacity to coordinate and oversee partnership activity, so that it could 'take full corporate responsibility for collaborative provision and assure itself that…all partnerships are secure and sustainable'.

39   The review reports were consistent in covering, where relevant, the standard components of academic quality assurance connected with collaborative provision, including partner approval and programme approval, monitoring and review, although the relative weights of these considerations varied. Most review reports

noted the development of a memorandum of agreement as a formal way of defining the relationship between the institution and its collaborative partner. Failure to establish such a memorandum in a timely manner was a contributory factor to three of the recommendations noted above. Some reports noted an explicit review of partnerships prior to the renewal of memoranda, while a rather larger number identified the absence or weakness of partner-renewal or monitoring processes, even if the initial partnership had been soundly established.

40   In relation to programme approval, monitoring and review, many review reports stated that institutions used the same processes for collaborative provision as for that based on campus, sometimes with additional features to take account of an increased level of academic risk. It is clear that for some institutions, definitional matters lead to uncertainty about what forms of provision should fall within the scope of the *Code of practice, Section 2*. In one institution, the interaction between the lack of a clear partner-renewal process and the requirements of programme review were identified as having the potential to lead either to inconsistency in the treatment of multiple programmes with the same partner, or to multiple reviewing of some aspects of the same partner's work, and the report recommended that the institution ensure effective institutional oversight of, and consistent practice with respect to, collaborative provision. Few reports went into detail about the variety of other forms of collaboration possible between institutions, but one did elaborate on the thoroughness with which admissions-related facilitation agreements and student exchanges were managed. At this institution, a large number of such agreements had been established under strategic direction. These schemes, and other elements of collaborative provision, were found to be soundly managed by a collaborative provision subcommittee. The subsequent enhancement of international student mobility was seen as a feature of good practice [Swansea University, paragraph 152].

41   Assessment and external examining in relation to collaborative provision received relatively modest attention in the review reports. One report drew attention to the importance of consistency in the appointment of external examiners across different categories of provision, and another explicitly noted the institution's use of the same appointment procedure for external examiners for collaborative provision as for all its other programmes. One institution went further and, where appropriate, used the same external examiners for both the internally and partner-delivered versions of programmes. Another institution's mechanisms for managing assessment at partner institutions contributed to the identification of a feature of good practice. Practices included cross-moderation events, meetings between external examiners and partner staff, and an explicit requirement on the external examiner report form to comment on standards of assessment [University of Glamorgan, paragraph 214]. However, one report identified a lack of clarity about the way in which the institution 'ensured that local external examiners appointed for its overseas provision were exposed to UK practices, conventions, and expectations in relation to academic standards' and urged vigilance in this area. In relation to assessment, one report noted that all student work at collaborative partners was second marked in-house and external examiners 'sometimes pointed out a need to emphasise the consistent use of the [institution's] assessment processes'.

42   It was at the level of operational management and inter-institutional communication that the most positive features of institutional practice relating to collaborative provision were discussed. In the case of award-bearing programmes, a key role can be that of institutional liaison contacts and effective individuals filling such posts are often important in successful collaborations. Such linking roles in Welsh institutions were variously titled, but had common features. One institution was quoted as describing such staff as performing 'a vital role in terms of staff development initiatives together with focusing on course development and on ensuring that appropriate attention is given to the implementation of key regulatory matters at each validated centre'. Another institution required its 'moderators' to report to a range of bodies; their academic school, Academic Registry, the Collaborative Provision Committee; and visiting partners. Visits made to partners included attending examination boards and programme committee meetings. A feature of good practice noted at one institution was the establishment of an annual conference and related induction training for staff fulfilling this link role. In addition, the practice of having staff from the Validation Unit accompany moderators on visits was also seen to aid consistency and good liaison with institutions [University of Wales, paragraphs 98 and 99]. Despite the generally positive references to these roles, however, one report noted a caveat in connection with a school where the role was dependant on a single individual to cover a large and complex provision.

43   A primary reason for engaging in collaborative activity was noted to be the provision of opportunities to students who would otherwise not have them, as a way of widening participation. Another potential benefit was the opportunity for continuing professional development of partner staff. A number of reports commented upon the views of students and staff at partners, some of which were relevant to student representation and are covered in previous sections of this paper. The students at one partner were reportedly positive about a wide range of course matters ranging from clarity of ownership of the award, through to the quality of feedback and the ready access to staff and learning resources. Partner staff were similarly positive about various aspects of the collaboration, including a strong sense of equality in partnership. At another institution, a forum was established for its senior managers to discuss strategic and managerial matters with their equivalents at partner organisations. A sense of partnership was expressed in a further example where students felt themselves to be students of both the higher education institution and its partner. In this latter case the community feeling that had been built up within the partnership and the resources available from the home institution, including e-journals, was identified as a feature of good practice [University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, paragraph 130]. The staff of this institution also had a close relationship with partner staff, sharing teaching, for example, and all partner staff were able to make use of the same development opportunities. The cross-moderation events referred to above also contributed positively to partner staff development.

44   Information provided for students studying through collaborative provision is another important facet of this type of provision. One of the review reports made a recommendation concerning an absence of programme specifications at partner organisations. The review team were unable to find partner staff who were aware of

such documents and this clearly linked back to an institutional weakness in their use. Another report noted lapses in the information of partners, including irregularities on transcripts and discrepancies in the published information, suggesting that the institution's ability to oversee such matters needed to be improved. A further report considered that the partial coverage of an online list of partnerships did not match the expectations of the *Code of practice* in regard to partnership registers. More positively, at one institution, a newly formed editorial board was to assume responsibility for materials produced by partner organisations.

Conclusions and comparative review

45   The findings of this paper align well with the findings of the *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers on:

- Student representation and feedback
- Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
- Collaborative provision.

46   The Institutional review reports identified considerable strength in institutions' recognition of students' contribution to the management of quality and standards. Both this paper and the *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers on student representation and feedback note that effective and generally well-supported representational systems have been found, particularly at institutional level and in partnership with Students' Unions or other representative bodies. A strong picture also emerges of representation at programme or departmental level, with institutions making efforts to improve representation at school and faculty level. Both this paper and its counterparts for England and Northern Ireland note that the effectiveness of representation was kept under review and needed periodic refreshing in cooperation with students themselves, in order to maintain the positive benefits that can accrue.

47   Another overall strength across both sectors lies in the use made of student feedback. The review reports found that this was collected in a variety of ways, but most frequently through end-of-module questionnaires and reported as part of annual quality assurance procedures. Institutions were found to work in close and supportive partnerships with their Students' Unions within constitutional governance frameworks and other well-embedded features such as staff-student consultative committees and the use of feedback in annual monitoring. Formal methods of feedback were often bolstered by good informal relationships with accessible staff. Systems were frequently underpinned by the provision of training for student representatives. Arrangements for 'closing the loop' by informing students of the actions taken in response to their feedback were not always so well developed. The *Outcomes from institutional audit* paper on student representation and feedback notes a similar approach to the management of feedback. A picture of similarity between the two sectors also emerges in the collection of feedback from graduates, only here activity was less well-developed with little strategic drive behind it.

48   A wide range of employer interactions were found to exist, even within one institution, with good practice identified by some review reports. Notwithstanding a

flexible interpretation of the topic, some institutions had little activity that was considered as providing feedback from employers. As in England and Northern Ireland, only a minority of reports mentioned strategic approaches to gathering feedback from employers, beyond reliance upon careers advisory services' employer links. Relations with PSRBs are also discussed in the paper in this series on Quality frameworks and arrangements for programme approval, monitoring and review.

49   Broadly speaking, institutions in Wales were found to have clear procedures for dealing with student complaints and appeals. The review reports, in covering institutional procedures in this area, indicated that arrangements were for the most part satisfactory, and in line with national expectations, as expressed in the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. The reports noted that formal procedures were for the most part clear and carefully monitored by senior committees, and were often supplemented by effective informal procedures. There were several examples of careful coordination between institutions and student representative bodies. For the most part, students appeared to be aware of institutional policies or sources of help or advice, although a small number of reports noted opportunities for improvements in the information provided to students.

50   This paper notes that the findings of the review reports in relation to collaborative provision were mixed. Collaborative provision serves an important strategic purpose for a few institutions in Wales, but for most others it is a relatively minor, if potentially growing, activity. It is therefore difficult to provide a meaningful aggregate picture. The reports found strength in work undertaken at operational level. The importance of a strong disciplinary-level liaison role was noted, as it has been in institutions in England and Northern Ireland. However, this paper also notes that a considerable number of reports identified recommendations in connection with this topic, especially with regard to institutional oversight of provision and the timely definition of contractual obligations. A particular matter is the balance to be struck between devolution of responsibility for quality and standards while maintaining sufficient institutional oversight. The *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers on collaborative provision note a similar range of strengths and weaknesses.

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[1]

North East Wales Institute of Higher Education[2]

University of Wales, Bangor[3]

University of Wales, Aberystwyth[4]

University of Wales, Lampeter

University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Swansea University

Cardiff University

University of Glamorgan

Swansea Metropolitan University

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[1] Now Trinity University College
[2] Now Glyndŵr University
[3] Now Bangor University
[4] 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.