



Quality enhancement and assurance in Wales

A changing picture?

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Executive summary

This report is the result of a joint study by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (the Academy) exploring changes in quality assurance and quality enhancement taking place in Wales. A previous report in 2008 focused on England and Northern Ireland. Overall, the purpose of the project in Wales was to reflect back to the sector current practice and development and to support and encourage HE institutions in the enhancement of quality at various levels, such as on the one hand through curriculum development and on the other as part of a planned and systematic institutional approach.

The project involved collecting and analysing data from information gathered through semi-structured discussions with HE institutions in Wales conducted through QAA's institutional liaison scheme.

A key feature identified for the Welsh context was the 'closeness' of government to higher education. Over the last decade the Welsh Assembly Government has set out a range of priorities for higher education. Most prominent have been priorities relating to widening access, sustainable development and global citizenship, increasing Welsh-medium provision, skills and employability, and reconfiguration and collaboration between HE institutions. In response strategic developments in HE institutions have addressed the need to improve access and retention, to enhance the skills and employability of graduates, to continue the growth of Welsh medium provision and to consider increased collaboration across the Welsh HE sector. Institutions noted concerns (and opportunities) relating to the small size of the HE sector in Wales, the bilingual challenge and the need to avoid parochial approaches to quality enhancement. These concerns reflected recognition that Welsh institutions competed within a UK-wide, European and global environment.

Although the study identified no general agreement on a definition for quality enhancement it was commonly acknowledged that enhancement was primarily concerned with the student experience, particularly the learning experience. A common perception was that quality enhancement was a natural development of quality assurance. The latter, through its processes, provided evidence and material for the foundation of quality enhancement. Processes such as annual monitoring, programme validation, and thematic review were seen as providing the evidence which could inform enhancement activities and development. Institutions saw the need for external scrutiny to assist the institution in upholding quality and

standards but there was general agreement that external scrutiny of enhancement needed to be sensitive to institutional context and the relationship between innovation and risk.

Institutional responses indicated a universal acceptance of the close link between quality assurance and quality enhancement but opinion was divided on the degree to which they needed to be integrated. Integration of assurance and enhancement depended to some extent on the internal structure and operating practice of an institution with some co-locating assurance and enhancement staff and other institutions placing more emphasis on integration through committee structures. Overall the physical integration of 'quality' staff was not a priority for senior administrative staff in Welsh institutions.

The drivers of enhancement were identified as both top-down and bottom-up. The top-down drivers reflected the requirements of QAA and national policy and required the leadership of senior management within the institution. Leadership was commonly provided by a Deputy or Pro-Vice-Chancellor who usually had a portfolio that covered the development of learning and teaching. The bottom-up approach reflected practice and developments within the classroom and was generally nurtured at Faculty or School level frequently with the support of a dedicated unit such as a centre for excellence in learning and teaching. Institutions did not see quality enhancement as a principal driver of institutional strategy but did regard it as a key aspect in all the work of the institution and an integral part of institutional planning.

Student engagement with enhancement was seen primarily as offering evaluation of modules, programmes and the institution in general through internal surveys, through the National Student Survey (NSS), and by participation in staff-student consultative committees and other forums. At present student input can be viewed as largely concerned with quality assurance processes and there was little indication from institutional responses of a more active engagement with enhancement.

Overall the project revealed a strong and vigorous interest in the promotion of quality enhancement in Welsh institutions. As expected there were various approaches to enhancement and the project did not seek 'right' answers for promoting enhancement. Nevertheless there was a good deal of common ground among institutions which possibly reflected the small size and tight knit of the HE community in Wales. This common ground included: acceptance that enhancement primarily applied to the student experience; acknowledgment that the 'deliberate steps' definition of enhancement proposed by QAA was suitable for the purpose of review; use of the NSS as a tool for evaluation and informing action; the high to very high level of overall satisfaction of students reported through the NSS.

I. Purpose of the report

- I.1 This report is an outcome of joint working by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (the Academy) exploring the way in which changes in quality assurance and quality enhancement are taking place across the higher education sector in Wales. The context for this exploration derives in part from the greater focus to be given to enhancement in the new process for Institutional Review. It also reflects the growing interest in enhancement that the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), QAA and the Academy are seeking to support. Following consultation between all three agencies a small team involving staff from QAA and the Academy was tasked with carrying forward a project to study current developments around quality enhancement.
- I.2 The Welsh project extended a similar project conducted, in conjunction with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in England and Northern Ireland in 2007-08. The report of this predecessor project is available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/Events/Past_Events/Documents/QualityEnhancementreport.pdf
- I.3 Overall, the purpose of the project leading to this report was to support and encourage HE institutions in Wales in pursuing the enhancement of quality at various levels. Enhancement may range from curriculum development and innovation with a recognisable impact on the student learning experience to exploring the various ways in which quality enhancement can be part of a planned and systematic approach to quality. In perhaps over-simplified terms the former type of enhancement might be characterised by outcomes and the latter type will be part of a process. The intention of the project team was to reflect back to the sector the diverse ways in which 'quality enhancement' is conceptualised, led, managed and supported in Welsh institutions with varying characteristics and missions.
- I.4 An important starting point for the Welsh project was to identify the various institutional definitions of enhancement so as to give a better

understanding of the range of approaches which are appropriate in a diverse sector. The project had the subsidiary aim of supporting the ongoing development of an effective institutional review process for Wales. One important aspect of this will be to support review teams in developing suitably contextualised understandings of the various approaches to quality enhancement that currently exist within Welsh institutions.

2. Background and context

- 2.1 Over the last decade it is possible to trace a growing emphasis on the explicit enhancement of quality across the UK higher education sector.
- 2.2 Within institutions, the enhancement of learning and teaching, often seen as an implicit part of the work of individual teachers, is increasingly the subject of explicit discourse through, for example, annual learning and teaching conferences within institutions. In many cases, structures and processes to support quality enhancement are receiving more attention than in the past. Part of the intention underlying the joint work between QAA and the Academy is to test whether, and to what extent, institutional approaches are being modified to reflect an increasing emphasis on quality enhancement.
- 2.3 There is already some evidence of this change in Welsh institutional learning and teaching strategies for 2007–10, which make more specific references to enhancement and its links with quality assurance. A report on the learning and teaching strategies is available at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/aboutus/wales/our_work_wales/policy.
- 2.4 Perhaps this is best illustrated by the way Welsh institutions have used the National Student Survey (NSS) and internal student surveys, essentially a quality assurance approach, to inform their action plans for enhancing the student experience. In some cases, the relationship between assurance and enhancement is conceived of as hierarchical – assurance of quality is seen as a necessary component of effective enhancement, or vice versa. In other cases, quality assurance and quality enhancement are mutually reinforcing, but parallel, concepts.
- 2.5 The evolving focus on quality enhancement is reflected in, and supported by, cross-sectoral bodies such as HEFCW, QAA, JISC and the Academy. The HEFCW Circular W04/06HE, *Mechanisms for supporting excellent teaching in higher education* (January 2004), set out the key features of the mechanisms for supporting excellent teaching to be adopted by HEFCW from 2004–05 onwards, namely by the development of: institutional

learning and teaching strategies; institutional human resource strategies (including teaching-led promotions); and thematic and subject enhancement. In addition, HEFCW promoted discussions about ways of coordinating and supporting quality enhancement activity in the Welsh sector. More recently in October 2008 HEFCW organised a conference '*Informing HEFCW's approach to quality enhancement in higher education*'. A proposition from HEFCW at this meeting was to create a more observable approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities with the possibility of pooling resources and minimising duplication of effort and activities.

- 2.6 The Higher Education Academy is a body with a specific UK-wide remit to support enhancement. Its work in relation to professional standards and subject communities through the network of 24 subject centres has increasingly influenced the way HE institutions approach enhancement. A feature of its work in Wales is the close liaison it has with HEFCW, Higher Education Wales (the Welsh arm of Universities UK) and institutions (through its own Welsh Institutional Group) in developing its programme of enhancement activities. Current enhancement approaches in Wales include the first year experience, Welsh medium provision, assessment and feedback and the link between teaching and research. The UK HE sector as a whole continues to regard support for quality enhancement as very important and the Academy is planning a greater focus in 2009–10, including work around cross-organisational approaches to the NSS.
- 2.7 The increasing focus on enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities has also been encouraged by QAA. The development of an enhancement-led approach in Scotland has undoubtedly influenced thinking in other parts of the UK. The current round of Institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland, which began in 2006–07, has incorporated a greater focus on quality enhancement than was the case previously. In this context, HEFCW has requested that QAA consider incorporating a similar focus on quality enhancement in the forthcoming programme of institutional reviews in Wales. In order to inform this approach HEFCW commissioned an external review of

quality enhancement and set up the Quality Working Group. The draft *Handbook for Institutional review: Wales* which has recently been the subject of consultation states that *'For the purposes of institutional review, quality enhancement is seen as a process rather than an outcome.'*

- 2.8 Another key feature of the Welsh context is the 'closeness' of government to higher education. Over the last decade the Welsh Assembly Government has set out a range of priorities for higher education. Most prominent have been priorities relating to widening access, sustainable development and global citizenship, increasing Welsh-medium provision, skills and employability, and reconfiguration and collaboration between HE institutions.
- 2.9 Finally a very important aspect of higher education in Wales is the generally high level of overall satisfaction of students. In the 2008 NSS five Welsh HEIs were in the top 50 institutions for overall student satisfaction. More recently the *Times Higher Education* student satisfaction survey reported in January 2009 that four Welsh institutions were in the top 20 institutions. Those Welsh institutions with a strong widening access mission generally have lower overall student satisfaction (75-80% range) in the NSS, but nevertheless they are showing year-on-year improvement in overall student satisfaction. As will become apparent later in the report the results of the NSS play a major role in the evaluation of enhancement activities in Welsh institutions. It is also worth noting the comparatively high proportion of students in Wales studying part time (about 40% in 2007–08). This indicates a need to view the student experience in broad terms where issues such as timetabling and access to resources will impact on the learning experience.

3. Methodology

3.1 Process

- 3.11 The project involved collecting and analysing data from information gathered through semi-structured discussions with HE institutions in Wales conducted through the QAA's institutional liaison scheme. By the nature of their position in the institution, it was recognised that respondents who are liaison contacts with QAA were likely to be well-informed about formal approaches to quality assurance and quality enhancement matters. Nevertheless, given the broad nature of quality enhancement, institutional contacts were asked to consider the questionnaire from a range of different perspectives, taking into consideration, for example, views from: Pro-Vice-Chancellors with responsibility for teaching and learning; quality officers; those involved in academic support; and staff working at departmental level.
- 3.12 In order to collate and analyse respondents' views, a framework for discussion of quality assurance and enhancement was provided for institutional contacts and their colleagues. The guideline questions in the framework were intended to stimulate discussion and provide an indication of the ground to be covered. However, the project team emphasized that there was no wish to question why HE institutions take different perspectives, but rather, to gain a holistic view of how quality enhancement is understood.
- 3.13 The template for the structure of discussion during interviews is provided in Appendix 1 and the list of participating institutions in Appendix 2. The questions used were broadly the same as those for the England and Northern Ireland survey, to facilitate comparison of the findings, but some changes were made to reflect differences in the Welsh sector.

3.2 Limitations of the enquiry

- 3.21 The limitations on the outcomes of the project, imposed by both the data collection method and the time and resources available for analysis, needs to be acknowledged. Given the size of the HE sector in Wales the project naturally embraces a small population sample. Added to this are considerable variations in the size of Welsh institutions and the wide range of missions embraced by the institutions.
- 3.22 Recognising the broad nature of quality enhancement, open and wide-ranging discussion was encouraged, however, these conversations were generally with staff with a quality assurance role rather than those involved in the development of learning and teaching. When this was linked with the small size of the sample population, it meant that some significant statements, or statements with an interesting aspect, were made by just one or two institutions. Some of these have been used or quoted where the project team felt that they reflected the situation across the Welsh HE sector, or where they raised particularly interesting perspectives.
- 3.23 In the sections that follow, comments from the records of conversations have been used to illustrate the range of responses. As far as possible these are exact quotations from the record, but it has occasionally been necessary to paraphrase in order to clarify meaning.

4. The impact of change

4.1 Recent and ongoing change in the Welsh sector

4.11 In 2002, the Welsh Assembly Government published a ten year strategy for higher education in Wales: *Reaching Higher, Higher Education and the Learning Country* which set out its strategic vision of how the HE sector would contribute to the achievement of its programme of education and lifelong learning in the period to 2010. The strategy placed a very strong emphasis on widening access and social justice. Subsequent significant strategic developments, in response to Assembly Government priorities, have recognised the importance of improving retention, enhancing the employability of graduates, continuing the growth of Welsh medium provision and the promotion of reconfiguration and collaboration between Welsh HE institutions.

4.12 In July 2008, noting that the period of the *Reaching Higher* strategy was coming to an end, the Welsh Assembly Government set out policy aspirations in *Transforming Education and Training Provision in Wales*. The key elements included the following:

- a refreshment of higher education strategy;
- seeking advice from Sector Skills Councils on employers' requirements for high-level skills;
- extending delivery of Foundation Degrees;
- a requirement for collaborative work in 14–19 networks between HE institutions, FE institutions and work-based learning providers to develop further progression routes and expand local opportunities;
- establishment of clear entry and exit points for post-18 learners.

4.13 To take forward these proposals the Welsh Assembly Government set up, under the chairmanship of Professor Merfyn Jones, the Task and Finish group to review higher education in Wales. Phase I of the work was completed in late 2008 and focused on student financing. The key recommendation was to move away from providing a universal tuition fee grant for Welsh students to offset the cost of fees to a system that

focused financial assistance on those students with the greatest need. Phase 2 of the review, which was published in June 2009, had much broader scope. Among the key findings were proposals for:

- a national compact between HE institutions, other HE providers, HEFCW and the Welsh Assembly Government;
- a reformed role for HE–FE partnerships;
- a consolidated and stronger cohort of HE institutions;
- promotion of further provision of foundation degrees.

4.14 The ministerial response to the report highlighted the following:

‘The higher education community must also work in partnership with FE, employers, Sector Skills Councils and take the steer from the Wales Employment and Skills Board if it is to provide the higher level skills we need in Wales, including a special focus on technician-level and management skills, flexible ways of learning, including part-time and workplace provision. It must play a key role in the transformation agenda of post 16 provision. I want our higher education community to work in partnership with schools, FE colleges, employers and communities to offer young people and adult learners a wide choice of courses and pathways. This will embed and strengthen the kind of approaches to access which have been most successful to date, and make access and successful participation a reality for many more Welsh citizens ... I intend to consider and develop new ways of providing Foundation Degrees in Wales, as a way of bridging our further and higher education sectors to open wider and flexible opportunities for learners and to develop higher level skills for employment.’

4.15 Given the very strong Government policy, and financial incentives provided by HEFCW to support policy, quality enhancement within HE institutions has needed to address widening access and retention and to consider collaborative initiatives with a range of partners. The reports of the Task and Finish group and ministerial response give an indication of areas likely to be the subject of enhancement in the coming years.

4.2 Major changes in institutions

4.21 Recently there have been significant changes within some institutions in Wales mainly with regard to applications for, and achievement of, degree-awarding powers and university title. As a consequence some institutions have taken steps towards awarding their own degrees while others continue to make awards from the University of Wales.

4.22 The other major influence has been the Assembly Government's reconfiguration and collaboration initiative with the strategic alliance between the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and the University of Glamorgan, and the planned merger of Trinity University College and the University of Wales, Lampeter.

4.23 Particularly in terms of quality assurance these applications and mergers have had important implications but quality enhancement has frequently been an outcome with improvement, for example, to staff development and curriculum issues such as assessment and feedback.

4.3 Drivers for change to quality enhancement

4.31 Institutional responses identified a number of key drivers for change which included:

- results of the NSS and other internal surveys of student opinion;
- continuing growth and diversification of the student population;
- a raising of student expectations;

- continuing rapid development of technology-enhanced learning and teaching;
- devolution of responsibility and greater ownership by staff of the quality agenda;
- restructuring within institutions (e.g. of academic units; the modular curriculum);
- the new QAA institutional review process placing a greater focus on quality enhancement;
- increasing budgetary constraints and the need to improve efficiency.

4.32 There was some variation among institutions in views about the drivers; one institution noted that they were essentially top-down as they reflected the requirements of QAA and national policy. Whilst accepting the top-down approach another institution saw the need to foster ownership of developments in quality arising from external drivers.

The University recognises a need to enhance ownership of and confidence in quality and standards amongst academic staff, which will be fostered further by devolution of responsibility as appropriate to a local level.

Alongside this were key developments driven from the bottom-up and centred upon staff and students embracing new approaches to learning and teaching which included enhancement of study skills, flexible delivery, 24/7 access to teaching materials, e-learning and virtual learning environments.

4.33 For one institution the joint work on enhancement between QAA and the Academy in Wales had come at an appropriate time. It was seeking to redefine quality enhancement and embed it in institutional processes. Information about how quality enhancement is regarded across the sector in Wales would help guide the institution through a period of significant change.

5. Definitions and concepts of quality enhancement

5.1 Definitions and concepts

- 5.11 In general institutions gave few specific definitions for quality enhancement. There was a general recognition that the definition proposed by QAA for use in institutional review of *'taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'* was a useful concept for review purposes and some institutions adopted variations of this definition for their own purposes. Generally there was a preference for loose, broad definitions that captured enhancement activity rather than constraining it.

There is an institutional definition but it is one that tries to reflect what the institution is doing rather than being an imposed definition.

- 5.12 Respondents identified another problem with trying to give a precise definition of enhancement. Over time institutional policies and procedures evolved, commonly in response to changes in the student population or internal restructuring, and there were consequent changes of emphasis for enhancement.

- 5.13 There was a common feeling that the concept of quality enhancement involved cultural change and that dissemination, for example of good practice, was a key component.

The University has deliberately re-titled some of its activities to ensure an understanding of the enhancement focus. The Enhancement Reviews are one such example and are cross-university rather than School-focused.

- 5.14 It was recognised that the concept of quality enhancement generally involved both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Given the external requirements relating to quality assurance it was commonly agreed that there was a need for strong leadership and direction at institutional level.

Conversely it was noted that much quality enhancement was bottom-up and reflected practice and developments within the classroom. Exchange of ideas across these levels was achieved through committees or through designated learning and teaching development units.

- 5.15 Although not a definition, one institution did provide a perceptive summary of the dimensions of enhancement that could act as a proxy for a definition.

The key features of successful quality enhancement are:

- *having strategic clarity;*
- *informing future strategic development and investment;*
- *enhancing reputation;*
- *being recognised as trying to make things better;*
- *having a clearer description of the nature of processes and their purpose;*
- *dissolving into the normal business of the University.*

5.2 Enhancement of what?

- 5.21 There was common agreement in the institutional responses that enhancement was primarily concerned with the student experience, particularly the learning experience. With regard to the latter, reference was made by institutions to supporting learning through new and evolving technologies, providing timely feedback on assessment, supporting innovation and disseminating good practice.

The University regards quality enhancement as the enhancement of the student learning experience, including the identification and dissemination of good practice.

Proactively developing the student learning experience to ensure better outcomes.

5.22 It was also noted that enhancement was important in the broader context of the student experience, for example, in providing good quality student accommodation and opportunities for social learning outside the classroom.

5.23 Only one institution raised the issue of trying to define the boundaries of the student experience, but it is likely that the concern is more widespread. This institution's approach, based around the student life cycle, accorded with other developments within the Welsh HE sector. With a strong focus on widening access and the expansion of flexible learning a number of institutions are providing increasing personal support to students across the life cycle from pre-admission through to graduation and employment.

The University is also trying to define what it means by "student experience" and to put a boundary around that definition. It has found the life-cycle approach useful.

5.3 Enhancement and 'good practice'

5.31 Although institutional responses on a definition of enhancement were limited, there was a greater range of responses to the question about defining and recognising good practice. As noted in the similar investigation of quality enhancement in England and Northern Ireland, this range of responses could give an indication of the diversity of approaches to enhancement. The responses ranged from the very short and succinct:

Good practice should be demonstrably effective.

To the more explanatory:

The development of something new and which enhances the student experience ... and can

develop further into good practice which can then cascade into different areas.

- 5.32 There was a general understanding that good practice was transferable institution-wide, however, there was also reference to the familiar debate about good practice in one area or discipline being normal practice elsewhere with perhaps limited potential for broader application.

Good practice is not evidence of enhancement – the trick is to be able to translate it.

- 5.33 One institution defined good practice worthy of dissemination as:

A feature of a module, programme, subject or school-wide activity which enhances the quality of the student experience’.

The good practice enhanced minimum expectations and potentially could be transferable across subjects, schools and the broad higher education sector. Two institutions referred to quality assurance processes, for example annual monitoring, providing a bottom-up approach to identifying good practice. Ways of disseminating good practice included: establishing a good practice website generating automatic emails seeking feedback; conducting cross-institutional thematic reviews (e.g. of retention) to identify and share good practice; running good practice workshops in a staff development week; and producing an annual enhancement-good practice publication.

5.4 The relationship between quality enhancement and quality assurance

- 5.41 All the institutions spoke of a natural link between quality assurance and quality enhancement, however, there were varying views on the relationship between the two. Perhaps the most common perception was that quality enhancement was a development of quality assurance. The latter, through its processes, provided evidence and material for the foundation of quality enhancement. Processes mentioned included annual monitoring, programme

validation and thematic audit. Aspects of enhancement identified were disseminated through committees, away days, websites, newsletters and bespoke documents such as 'Learning from Validation'.

Quality assurance processes provide a foundation for enhancement activities by drawing on a range of evidence at different levels, and are designed so as not to stifle creativity and innovation in programme design and delivery.

5.42 One institution commented that because the boundaries between quality assurance and enhancement were blurred this required co-ordination of agendas between quality committees and cross-membership within these committees. Another institution approached this by giving the quality assurance committee a brief for considering quality enhancement. In the responses only one institution indicated that it was considering development of a separate quality enhancement action plan, possibly to be provided as an annex to the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

5.43 In addition there were some intriguing references to the relationship

Teaching staff see themselves as 'quality enhancers' rather than 'quality assurers'.

Quality Assurance is the external face of the university whilst quality enhancement is more internal.

Although isolated these statements probably reflect a much more general view, that staff carrying out learning and teaching activities were invariably engaging in enhancement of the student learning experience. In contrast, assurance is seen to be about providing evidence of the maintenance of quality and standards which was of prime importance to the institution's external image.

5.5 Attitudes to external scrutiny of quality enhancement

5.51 In carrying out the similar investigation of quality assurance and enhancement in England and Northern Ireland it was made clear through institutional responses and then by conference delegates that enhancement could suffer if subjected to insensitive external scrutiny. To a large extent this reflected the feeling that enhancement was a more personal affair centred on the relationship between staff and students. Responses in Wales showed similar concern. It was suggested that an exacting audit of enhancement activity could stifle innovation and that if quality enhancement became a significant part of the evidence on which audit and review judgments were based, it could lead to mechanistic approaches.

The danger is that institutions become pre-occupied with meeting external criteria resulting in a bureaucratic and mechanistic approach to quality assurance and enhancement, at the expense of valuable internal developments.

It should be noted that the consultation exercise on the new institutional review methodology in Wales was designed to consider and address just such concerns.

5.52 It was also clear from the responses that institutions accepted the need for external scrutiny in providing the institution with external advice on upholding quality and standards. With regard to enhancement though there was a call for approaches to external scrutiny of enhancement to be 'appropriate'. There was little or no indication of the nature of an appropriate scrutiny process other than it taking account of the institutional context and, by inference, being 'light-touch'.

Such external scrutiny must be carried out within the specific institutional context. Scrutiny of QE in itself may be beneficial – but the nature of the approach and any ensuing judgments should be appropriate.

5.6 Innovation and risk

- 5.61 The attitudes to external scrutiny outlined above probably reflected a concern that innovation, and by extension enhancement, carried a risk. It was noted that quality assurance could help mitigate risk.

Innovation is an integral part of quality enhancement. The introduction of innovative measures will inevitably carry a degree of risk and the quality assurance procedures provide a means of identifying and mitigating risk.

- 5.62 Attitudes expressed in the institutional responses varied from a plea to guard against penalising staff experimenting to ensuring that innovation anticipated risk and was not detrimental to the student learning experience. Some institutions had developed an approach to minimising risk:

The university uses pilot projects for innovations to assess cost, benefit, risk and effectiveness.

The Learning and Teaching Committee is the forum for debate around innovation and such initiatives are managed within a project management framework.

- 5.63 Perhaps one institution best summed up the general sentiment with regard to risk arising from innovation

Risk is seen as being part and parcel of a more dynamic institution and that without some element of risk the outcome may be stagnation.

6. Strategies for quality enhancement

6.1 Can enhancement be strategic?

6.1.1 Responses on this question were limited. The view was that institutional strategies were about change and vision which built upon established institutional reputations for a range of activities, for instance research or widening access. It was agreed that within strategic developments there was a place for more explicit use of quality enhancement to encourage dissemination of ideas and good practice.

6.2 Explicit and implicit approaches to developing quality enhancement

6.2.1 As indicated above institutions regarded quality enhancement as the key to improvement of the student experience, particularly the learning experience. Explicit approaches to this included:

- ensuring that quality assurance processes (e.g. annual monitoring, validation) both informed and were informed by quality enhancement;
- providing advice, guidance and resources through centres for excellence in learning and teaching (CELTs) or equivalents;
- organising annual internal conferences focused on quality enhancement and/or providing internal publications;
- rewarding excellent teaching.

The aim is to enhance the quality of the student learning experience through improved quality procedures.

The CELT allows staff to bid for learning and teaching grants and these are often enhancement-focused. This then feeds back through the system from the bottom up through the annual Learning and Teaching Conference and publications in the CELT journal.

- 6.22 Implicit approaches received only limited reference in the institutional responses and generally centred on the relationship between staff and students and what was meant by the student experience.

The University feels that it is important for it to capture exactly what it means by the term “student experience.” This needs to be linked to the transactional agreement that it has with each of its students.

- 6.23 This did lead to what, at face value, looked like unusual statements but which captured the implicit nature of enhancement. It is more than likely that the sentiments expressed below will strike a chord with staff directly involved with the student experience.

QE is not currently focused in one particular area but permeates all the activities of the institution.

A culture of improvement is essential. Quality enhancement as a process or an outcome should become so visible that it's invisible.

6.3 Leadership of quality enhancement

- 6.31 Institutional responses showed that in almost all the institutions leadership was provided by a Deputy or Pro-Vice-Chancellor who had a portfolio that covered the development of learning and teaching or in some instances a role that embraced quality assurance and quality enhancement. Such post holders were frequently supported by senior deliberative committees and by dedicated officers and support units. The general impression from the responses, for example where there was reference to support for the PVC by the Quality Office, is that the DVC or PVC had a strong external facing role.

The DVC maintains an overview of the institution's "deliberate steps".

Leadership for enhancement is located in the Academic Policy section of the Registry and is led by the PVC Education and Students.

- 6.32 In addition most of the institutional responses referred to the need for leadership at the Faculty or School level and this was usually provided by Deans or Associate Deans with a remit for learning and teaching and the dissemination of good practice.

The Heads of Faculty who lead on enhancement are present at the QA committee.

Commonly the work of the Deans was assisted by informal groups and required co-ordination of approaches with Directors for estates, library and information services and CELTs.

The Associate Deans (L&T) would also have the explicit task of driving quality enhancement in the Schools coordinated by the Learning and Teaching Forum chaired by the Director of the CELT.

- 6.33 One institution with a teaching fellowship scheme was considering a greater leadership role for the teaching fellows.

The HEI is considering developments to give teaching fellows a greater role in identifying and promoting good practice and to pioneer change and improvement across the institution.

6.4 Relation of quality enhancement to institutional mission, corporate plan, and strategies

6.41 As indicated in preceding paragraphs, institutions did not see quality enhancement as a principal driver of institutional strategy but did regard it as a key aspect in all the work of the institution and an integral part of institutional planning. One institution had recently introduced a quality enhancement strategy and another had decided to establish a Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Committee. Other institutions referred also to a strong link between quality enhancement and the learning and teaching strategy.

Enhancing the student experience is a recurring theme throughout the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, but the University has recognised that such references could be more explicit, and this will be taken into account in revision of the Strategy in 2009/10.

6.42 Although not usually stated explicitly it would seem a reason for not having a specific quality enhancement strategy was because it was a requirement of all strategies and that a key goal was to have 'embedded' enhancement. Indeed the one institution referring to a quality enhancement strategy had this as an ultimate goal.

For 2007–08 we introduced a QE strategy which sat alongside the existing Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and the procedures in the Teaching Quality Manual. This will be integrated into the LTA Strategy over time to facilitate reporting and embedding of QE in 'normal' processes.

7. Quality enhancement structures and processes

7.1 Institutional structures to support enhancement

7.11 The institutional responses indicated a universal acceptance of the close link between quality assurance and quality enhancement. When it came to structures and processes opinion and practice was more varied. Three institutions did not see 'physical' integration of the two as essential provided there were processes to promote cross-fertilisation or committees with clear remits.

The QA and QE units are not fully integrated... we do not think institutional structure matters, it is about cross-fertilisation and sharing.

The QA committee has a clear remit; the QE committee has a clear remit and agenda of work. Key differences between the two are that QA committee is about managing risks, standards, partnerships and QE committee is about improving what we are doing to react to students and environment and market.

The university's QA process committees feed into the overarching L&T committee that takes responsibility for QE.

7.12 An alternative view put forward by another two institutions recognised the advantage arising from close integration of quality assurance and enhancement.

The co-location of QA and QE is crucial as it helps to forge relationships. There is a desire at the central level not to operate in a box; we are aiming for greater integration so that the understanding of policies and processes can be widened.

The staff supporting quality assurance and enhancement are fully integrated in the Academic Office.

7.13 It would appear that integration of assurance and enhancement depended to some extent on the internal structure and operating practice of the institution and that pursuing structural integration was not a priority for Welsh institutions.

7.14 Although not directly stated there was the impression from the institutional responses that support for quality enhancement was best located at the Faculty or School level with leadership provided by Deans or Associate Deans. It was also noted that support for the Deans was provided in a number of institutions by dedicated centres for excellence in learning and teaching or their equivalents. These units stimulated initiatives in areas such as e-learning, staff development, pedagogic research and were able to encourage, co-ordinate and disseminate bottom-up approaches to enhancement. They were also seen as the key link to external enhancement agencies such as the Higher Education Academy. An important aspect of the work at this level was the encouragement of staff to engage with quality enhancement. Incentives included promotion through teaching excellence, teaching fellowships, resources to support research and innovative practice and sabbaticals. With regard to the latter, one institution was piloting a sabbatical scheme linked to programme redesign.

The Programme Redesign Sabbatical begins with programme evaluation followed by redesign ... the institution believes this planning will influence the enhancement of the future.

7.2 **Student engagement with quality assurance and quality enhancement**

7.21 Generally institutions gave extended responses on the engagement of students with quality processes. At a formal level, and particularly

with regard to quality assurance, this involved having effective student representation on institutional, faculty, departmental and programme-level committees. Commonly the Student Union provided training for representatives. Some institutions also referred to student representation on audit and review panels. When questioned about areas where student representation might not be appropriate some institutional contacts spoke of committees where other students were being discussed openly (e.g. assessment boards). Several institutions noted the difficulty of getting effective representation, particularly where there was a diverse body of students with flexible and off-campus learning patterns. Given the high proportion of part-time students in Welsh institutions this is likely to be a widespread problem. One of these institutions was considering 'virtual' representation.

The University is considering alternative means of engaging and communicating with students, including use of the VLEs.

- 7.22 A recurring difficulty mentioned in the institutional responses was the very heavy workload for Student Union sabbatical officers. Even where they are small in size Welsh institutions carried the usual complexity associated with running an HE institution and this created problems for the limited number of sabbatical officers which could be appointed by a small institution.

Sabbatical officers do not have sufficient time to provide the level of input we would like in all areas. It would be useful to have a larger pool of interested officers to call on for the range of QA and QE activities as well as other University activities and their own Union activities.

One institution was considering the use of paid faculty representatives to augment the role of sabbatical officers.

- 7.23 Student engagement with enhancement was seen primarily as offering evaluation of modules, programmes and the institution in general

through internal surveys, through the NSS, and by participation in staff-student consultative committees, forums and programme management committees. Two institutions referred to more formal schemes that sought to gain student opinion on broader issues and one institution had subject-based websites for comment on enhancements, while another held a Student Academic Council.

Student voice reps provide a cross-faculty and institutional view.

Student representation is in place across the board with regard to QA processes and also within some of the processes for QE. For example, students are represented on the panel which, each year, makes decisions about the recipients of the Innovation Fund for Learning and Teaching.

There are also subject-based websites where students can comment on enhancements.

- 7.24 Although known to be common in Welsh institutions, just one response referred to the use of student mentors in enhancing the student experience; in this instance the mentors were paid. This absence of comment and the emphasis on students' contribution to enhancement through assurance processes may reflect that institutions have yet to fully consider how to develop further the role of students and their representatives. It may also reflect that Welsh institutions see student representatives as largely serving a quality assurance function. In moving towards review methodologies which have a stronger enhancement aspect and greater student involvement QAA has taken note of this and has brought together the representative bodies and the Funding Council in Wales to discuss opportunities, to share resources and expertise and to support institutions' student engagement activities. A 'Wales approach to student engagement' will be launched in October 2009.

8. Evaluating the impact of quality enhancement

- 8.1 The majority of institutional responses referred to evaluation of the impact of quality enhancement through procedures such as annual monitoring of programmes, audit and the NSS and other surveys. To take a response that typified those of a number of institutions, annual monitoring considered progress against enhancement themes identified in the institution's learning and teaching strategy. Evaluation was provided through items such as external examiners' reports and the results from the NSS.

The institutional annual monitoring process picks up on how the relevant enhancement themes, set by the Learning and Teaching Committee, have been engaged with and their impact in any one year. NSS results provide a means of measuring impact.

- 8.2 Whilst there was a general acceptance that it can be hard to quantify the progress of quality enhancement, two institutions did make reference to the use of key performance indicators and measurement of progress using the NSS and other surveys.

Part of the process is establishing KPIs and targets for managing performance against them... part of the process is effective monitoring of the student experience through our own surveys, the NSS and direct engagement with the students.

- 8.3 In other instances the progress of specific enhancement themes was being measured by using institutional statistical data (e.g. recruitment, retention, employment rates). While all institutions made use of the NSS two did provide a cautionary note about over reliance on the NSS and other measures to monitor progress.

We do use standard QA tools – NSS, student feedback, better scores in league tables for ‘student experience’ type indicators... although it is hard to measure whether improvements are a result of QE or other factors.

The institution sees the problem with the NSS as being that students don’t have to qualify their answers... internal surveys sometimes give a different message.

- 8.4 As a general reflection it can be said that institutions were continuing to seek ways of providing evidence to show the impact of quality enhancement and in some instances it was noted that the evidence would be qualitative.

In addition there are instances of new initiatives resulting from some of our sharing good practice events... hopefully qualitative changes will be observable (e.g. better engagement from Schools, better engagement from students).

9. External support for enhancement

- 9.1 The principal source of support identified by a number of institutions was the Higher Education Academy. In particular it was noted that the Academy enhancement themes were identified and selected by the HE sector. This was achieved through consultation with HEW and the Academy's Welsh Institutional Group. It was also recognised that there was synchronisation of work between the Academy, HEFCW and other agencies such as JISC and QAA.

In Wales, the HEA themes are also influential, given that, in the main, they are themes identified by the HEIs themselves.

There appeared to be more effort, recently, to synchronise the efforts of the HEA/JISC/HEFCW to support enhancement initiatives.

- 9.2 Other more specific points raised by institutions included the HEFCW-funded Insight programme to allow academic staff to work with an employer and the Change Academy programme which allowed institutions to put forward proposals for specific enhancement projects.

10. Challenges in approaching quality enhancement

- 10.1 The major challenge was seen as one of resources. Firstly, financial resources for enhancement were limited with, for example, no national schemes such as those in England for National Teaching Fellows and Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Secondly, in terms of staff resources there was a concern about staff having the time to develop and learn from enhancement-driven change. In order for staff to engage with developments, the relevance of enhancement needed to be demonstrated.

QE can challenge the comfort zones for some staff. There needs to be a clear articulation of what QE is. It needs to be fit for purpose.

- 10.2 There were also concerns about the small size of the HE sector in Wales, the bilingual challenge and the need to avoid parochial approaches to quality enhancement. These concerns reflected acknowledgement by institutions that they competed within a UK-wide and global environment.
- 10.3 A small number of institutions, with a long tradition of provision in the Welsh medium, were well prepared for bilingual delivery and assessment. However, two institutions felt that developing the availability of learning, teaching and assessment in the medium of Welsh was proving difficult owing to lack of funding and the relatively small number of students seeking such provision.

11. Comparison with England and Northern Ireland

11.1 Institutional responses identified a number of significant differences between Wales and England and Northern Ireland, which included:

- the strong government influence through Assembly Government priorities such as widening access, sustainable development, global citizenship, skills and employability and reconfiguration and collaboration for HE;
- a perceived funding gap with the Welsh sector having significantly lower investment in HE;
- the Welsh language and bilingual delivery;
- the high level of collaboration between Welsh HE institutions and greater opportunity for dialogue;
- the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales.

11.2 Overall the impression was of a generally favorable environment for enhancement in Wales with particular advantage provided by the small size of the HE sector.

The size of the HE sector in Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government incentives could give excellent opportunities for enhancement in Wales. With the Wales Approach to Student Engagement and the St David's Day Declaration there is both the opportunity and appetite to co-operate in all aspects of HE.

11.3 The bilingual approach did give Welsh HE a distinctive character and this added an extra dimension to the enhancement agenda.

Schools operate bilingually. It is important to provide equal opportunities for those studying in Welsh and English and enhancements need to apply to both types of provision.

11.4 Two institutions, whilst acknowledging that collaboration was easier within a small sector, did note that competition could be more intense.

The sharing of enhancement ideas with other competitor institutions in Wales is a lot easier than in England (due to its size and smaller number of institutions). However, sharing of information with competitors has its downfalls such as bidding for income and competition for students.

In Wales, there is some competition between institutions for a limited pool of part-time students; nonetheless, this should not preclude the sharing of good practice.

11.5 In comparing the results of this study of the relationship of quality assurance and enhancement in the Welsh sector with those of the earlier study in England and Northern Ireland, there are a number of similarities:

- revision to the institutional review and audit processes has brought a sharper focus on enhancement and the feeling that the quality assurance approach provides a sound foundation for enhancement;
- there is no agreement on a single definition for enhancement in institutions though there is acceptance of the utility of the QAA definition around 'deliberate steps' for the purposes of audit and review;
- the development of specific quality enhancement strategies by institutions is rare;
- some difficulty, for the purposes of enhancement, in defining the boundaries of the student experience but acceptance that enhancement particularly applied to the student learning experience.

11.6 Further developments relating to quality and standards are expected in England following publication of QAA's report on its *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England*, the publication of the report of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee and forthcoming HEFCE Teaching Quality and the Student Experience Sub Committee report on quality arrangements.

12. Conclusions

- 12.1 Overall, the purpose of the project leading to this report was to support HE institutions in Wales in pursuing the enhancement of quality at various levels. In order to stimulate debate the intention of the project team was to reflect back to the sector the diverse ways in which 'quality enhancement' is conceptualised, led, managed and supported in Welsh institutions with varying characteristics and missions.
- 12.2 The project had the subsidiary aim of supporting an effective institutional review process for Wales. One important aspect of this will be to support review teams in developing suitably contextualised understandings of the various approaches to quality enhancement that currently exist.
- 12.3 The broad context for quality enhancement in Wales is one that has seen significant change in recent years with institutions seeking degree-awarding powers and university title. In addition there has been strong direction from the Welsh Assembly Government for higher education particularly for widening access, sustainability, global citizenship, skills development and for reconfiguration and collaboration between institutions. Unlike England there has not been funding for national enhancement initiatives, nevertheless, institutions have developed, among other things, centres for learning and teaching and mechanisms to reward outstanding teaching.
- 12.4 The overall success of institutions in Wales in enhancing the student experience is reflected by the generally high to very high level of overall satisfaction of students reported through the National Student Survey (NSS). As a corollary of this Welsh institutions have made extensive use of the NSS and other internal student surveys to inform their action plans for enhancing the student experience.
- 12.5 In general institutions appeared reluctant to give specific definitions for quality enhancement and there was a preference for loose, broad definitions that captured enhancement activity rather than constraining

it. There was a general recognition that the definition proposed by QAA for use in institutional review of *'taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities'* was a useful concept for review purposes. All the institutions spoke of a natural link between quality assurance and quality with perhaps the most common perception being that quality enhancement was a development of quality assurance. The latter, through its processes, provided evidence and material for the foundation of quality enhancement.

- 12.6 There was common agreement in the institutional responses that enhancement was primarily concerned with the student experience, particularly the learning experience. This involved both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Top-down referred to strong leadership and direction at institutional level and bottom-up generally reflected practice and developments within the classroom. In most institutions leadership was provided by a Deputy or Pro-Vice-Chancellor with strong support from Deans and associate Deans at the Faculty or School level. The Higher Education Academy was seen as the key external agency supporting quality enhancement in the Welsh HE sector.
- 12.7 There was a general sentiment that effective enhancement of the student experience was bottom-up reflecting the relationship of staff and students in general. It was recognised that this type of activity was hard to measure and quantify and more than one institution made the point that if successful this enhancement became 'invisible' as it basically became part of the normal practice and culture of the institution.
- 12.8 Opinion varied on the level of integration of quality assurance and quality enhancement processes and structures. Some institutions had physically integrated staff of the two areas whereas others preferred a less structured form of integration, for example, through common agenda setting and careful remits for appropriate committees. It was rare for an institution to have a specific quality enhancement strategy.
- 12.9 Student engagement with quality enhancement was achieved mainly through quality assurance approaches using student representation and

staff-student consultative groups. A concern about the heavy workload of Student Union sabbatical officers leading to some difficulty in achieving full dialogue was expressed by some institutions. In moving to a stronger emphasis on enhancement there was a case for greater and more consistent student involvement that goes beyond representation.

- 12.10 Evaluation of the impact of quality enhancement was primarily achieved through annual monitoring of programmes, audit and the NSS. In some institutions the progress of key enhancement themes and performance indicators (e.g. retention, employability) were measured using institutional statistical data.
- 12.11 Overall the project revealed a strong and vigorous interest in the promotion of quality enhancement in Welsh institutions. As expected there were various approaches to enhancement and the project did not seek 'right' answers for promoting enhancement. Nevertheless there was a good deal of common ground among institutions which possibly reflected the small size and tighter knit of the HE community in Wales. This common ground included: acceptance that enhancement primarily applied to the student experience; acknowledgement that the 'deliberate steps' definition of enhancement was suitable for the purpose of review; use of the NSS as a tool for evaluation and informing action plans for enhancement; and agreement that enhancement required the integration of top-down leadership and bottom-up commitment.
- 12.12 Finally a number of reports, including that of the Commons select committee and the forthcoming Westminster Government response, whilst not having a direct bearing on Welsh arrangements, will have a significant influence on thinking in Wales about quality and how it is assured and enhanced.

Appendix I – Questionnaire Template

Definitions and concepts

1. To what extent is the way that the institution thinks about and approaches QA and QE changing?
2. How do you (the institution) define QE and QA?
3. Has the definition changed/is it changing?

Strategies

4. Is the concept of QE built into institutional and/or departmental strategies?
5. Are strategies related to QE in the institution changing?
6. Where is leadership for QE located (if such a person can be identified)?

Institutional processes

7. To what extent are QA and QE processes linked (or separate) in the institution?
8. A recent cross sector statement has been developed on student engagement in Wales. Where do you see the institution in relation to this statement?
9. How do you know what impact QE has in the institution? What are the ways you find out?
10. Are institutional quality processes (e.g. monitoring, review, validation, enhancement) changing in the institution?
11. How will you know what the impact of the changes to processes is?

Institutional structures

12. Who is involved in the structures in the institution (e.g. committees, teams, centres, units) that support QE?
13. Are they different people from those involved in QA?

14. Are institutional quality structures changing in the institution
15. How will you know what the impact of structural change is?

Additional questions

16. What are the essential characteristics of good QE in your view?
17. What are the challenges to effective QE?
18. What is the place of risk, innovation in QE
19. What does 'good practice' mean and how can it contribute?
20. If your approach to QE is effective/successful, how will the institution be different in five years time?
21. What role should external scrutiny play in QE?
22. Are there any issues around enhancement that you consider to be specific to institutions in Wales?

Appendix 2 – Participating institutions

The project team is very grateful for the cooperation of all the institutions involved.

Aberystwyth University
Bangor University
Cardiff University
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff
University of Glamorgan
Glyndŵr University
University of Wales, Lampeter
University of Wales, Newport
The Open University in Wales
Swansea University
Swansea Metropolitan University
Trinity University College
The University of Wales

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