



Quality Enhancement Review of Aberystwyth University

Technical Report

April 2022

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This report is published in both English and Welsh.

About the Quality Enhancement Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Quality Enhancement Review \(QER\)](#) and has links to the QER handbook and other informative documents.¹ For 2021-22, the scope of QERs focused on quality assurance in line with the changes made by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to external quality assurance requirements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, QAA published an addendum to accompany the QER handbook which explains the adaptations to the method delivery. For 2021-22, providers have the opportunity to engage with QAA separately on quality enhancement. You can also find more information about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).²

About this review

This is the Technical Report of the QER conducted by QAA at Aberystwyth University. The review visit took place online between 25 and 27 April 2022. The review was conducted by a team of three reviewers:

- Mrs Claire Blanchard
- Professor Diane Meehan
- Miss Nina Di Cara (student reviewer).

In advance of the review visit, the provider submitted a self-evaluative document (the self-evaluative analysis) and a Prior Information Pack, comprising a range of materials about the provider's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards.

About this report

In this report, the QER team makes judgements on:

- the requirements of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) Part 1 for internal quality assurance
- the relevant baseline regulatory requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales.

The judgements can be found on page 2, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

Technical Reports set out the QER team's view under each of the report headings. A shorter Outcome Report sets out the main findings of the QER for a wider audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.³

QER Technical Reports are intended primarily for the provider reviewed, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports that identify findings across several providers.

¹ About QER: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review.

² About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

³ Outcome Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Aberystwyth-University

Overarching judgement about Aberystwyth University

Aberystwyth University **meets** the requirements of the ESG Part 1 for internal quality assurance.

Aberystwyth University **meets** the relevant baseline regulatory requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales.

This is a positive judgement, which means the provider has robust arrangements for securing academic standards, managing academic quality and for enhancing the quality of the student experience.

1 Contextual information about the provider, student population and the review

1.1 Summary information about the provider, including strategic framework, organisational structure

1 Founded in 1872, Aberystwyth University (the University) is celebrating its 150th anniversary. Originally a founding member of the University of Wales in 1893, the University secured its own degree awarding powers and then University Title in 2007, and since 2009 all students have been admitted to Aberystwyth University degrees. Today, it is a medium-sized, research-active University and has a broad range of subjects across physical and natural science, social sciences, humanities and creative arts. The University was originally based on the seafront in the Old College and now teaches principally on its Penglais Campus.

2 The University's mission is to deliver inspirational education and research in a supportive, creative and exceptional environment in Wales. The University's Strategic Plan (2018-23) sets out five high-level objectives: to empower students to unlock their own potential; to support researchers to undertake research with impact of world-leading quality; to make a significant contribution to Wales and beyond; to be an international destination of choice for students; and a commitment to Welsh language and culture.

3 The University has 17 departments/schools/institutes which are organised into three faculties: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Faculty of Business and Physical Sciences and Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences. Faculties have a common organisational and management structure and are led by a Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC). All faculties have a Faculty Academic Affairs Committee responsible for academic delivery.

4 The Council is the supreme governing body of the University and responsible for determining the University's strategic direction. Senate is responsible to the Council for the academic functions of the University including the regulation of academic interests of students which covers oversight of adherence to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). The University Executive Group, responsible for the overall management and administration of the University, is made up of the University's senior management team who are the Vice-Chancellor and the five Pro Vice-Chancellors. There is a separate Collaborative Provision Board which reports directly to Senate so that Senate has direct scrutiny of this area. There is then Academic Board which reports to Senate, chaired by the PVC for Learning, Teaching and Student Experience, with responsibility for monitoring and evaluating academic standards and quality of programmes. At faculty level, it is the Faculty Academic Affairs Committees that play a central role in quality assurance and enhancement.

5 The University has done very well in national quality assessment exercises. It was awarded Gold in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) in 2018,

and for its scores in the National Student Survey (NSS) it has been confirmed as the top university in Wales for the last six successive years.

1.2 Composition, key trends and anticipated changes in the student population, including information on retention, progression and outcomes

6 There are currently around 5,300 full-time undergraduate students registered with the University. The small number of part-time undergraduate students on campus are mostly repeating years of study. There are then about 45 distance learning undergraduate students located in the Department of Information Studies. For taught postgraduate provision there are just over 300 full-time and 90 part-time students on taught master's degree, and around 650 distance learning students studying on master's level modules.

7 In terms of research degrees, there are around 250 full-time students registered on professional doctorate and MPhil and PhD degrees. The University participates in a number of doctoral training partnerships or centres for doctoral training in Wales and the UK. In two of these partnerships, students will be based and registered for the degree at one university, but they will have a supervisor at two partners.

8 The University is one of the main providers of Welsh medium higher education and provides undergraduate and postgraduate courses through the medium of Welsh and bilingually in a range of subjects. Around 775 of current full-time students are fluent Welsh speakers.

9 At the time of the review, the number of 6,000 full-time degree students studying on campus is moderately fewer than at the time of the University's review in 2016. The University has expanded the number of integrated master's degrees and is working to increase on-campus full-time master's provision from international and UK students. While the intake of full-time postgraduate taught (PGT) students in 2021 is lower than the previous year, there has been expansion in distance learning and part-time postgraduate taught provision.

10 Key and important developments undertaken by the University to address national priorities and support regional and community needs include the introduction in September 2021 of the joint veterinary degree with the Royal Veterinary College along with associated degree schemes in veterinary biosciences. The University is also offering nursing qualifications for the first time, to both adult and mental health nurses, from September 2022. Students will be able to study up to half of their course through the medium of Welsh.

11 With regard to degree outcomes, the University has a lower proportion of good honours than other comparable universities. While there has been an increase in students graduating with good honours in 2020 and 2021 as a consequence of COVID measures, the University has experienced less degree inflation than has been seen in other parts of the sector.

1.3 Commentary on the preparation for the review, including how the provider and students worked in partnership in review preparation

12 The Academic Board established a working group to lead on the preparations for the review. The group was chaired by the Academic Registrar with memberships drawn from across departments and professional services and co-option of additional members as required. Students' Union (SU) representatives were also included along with the SU Student Support and Representation Manager. To ensure staff awareness of the review and ownership of the submission, regular updates were provided through the University's formal committee structure and to heads of academic and Professional Services department

meetings as well as other relevant staff.

13 The University embraced the flexibility afforded by the adaptations made to the review process for 2021-22 by producing a single submission document combining a self-evaluative analysis and change report. Draft documentation was reviewed by the working group, the University Executive Group and members of the Academic Board before being presented to a special meeting of Senate for sign-off.

14 The SU submitted a separate written submission which presented a number of recommendations to the University and QER review team. The University submitted a detailed response to recommendations in the form of an action plan with progress updates.

1.4 Summary of the provider's follow-up to the previous review

15 The University's previous QAA review, Higher Education Review Wales, took place in April 2016. The review team made five recommendations, one affirmation and identified one feature of good practice. The University prepared an action plan in response to the recommendations which was followed through to completion during 2016-17.¹

16 The University made the following responses to the recommendations. The first recommendation was to ensure the systematic involvement of students as partners in programme approval and review, and the enhancement of the student experience, with students now being included as members of scheme approval and periodic review panels. The second recommendation to ensure that a consistent approach to academic appeals is practised within and across institutes and the fourth to ensure consistency of core information provided to students in handbooks within and across institutes, were both addressed through the introduction of a new template for programme handbooks including common sections. The University has taken a number of steps in response to the third recommendation to ensure that all postgraduate research students receive appropriate training before undertaking teaching and assessment, including the introduction of a centralised register of students who teach, introduction in 2016 of its Teaching for Postgraduates at Aberystwyth University (TPAU) programme accredited at Associate Fellowship level by Advance HE, approval of a version of the NUS/UCU Postgraduate Employment Charter and is currently involved with a HEFCW-funded project to review policy and practice in relation to postgraduates who teach. The final recommendation was to consolidate and clearly articulate strategic priorities for the enhancement of learning opportunities at institute level, with a new enhancement plan being introduced and approved by Academic Board in 2017.

17 The University also developed an action plan in response to the 21 recommendations within the student submission and an update was submitted to Academic Board in March 2017.

2 Academic standards and quality processes

2.1 Key features of the provider's approach to managing quality and how students are involved in contributing to the management of the quality of learning

18 Aberystwyth University's approach to managing quality is enacted through an integrated system of processes that take place at every level of its academic provision from module-level feedback to annual quality reports to the University's Council. The University's Academic Quality Handbook describes all the relevant processes, policies and systems relevant to academic quality at the University. The handbook is readily accessible online.

19 Ultimate responsibility for governance at the University lies with the Council who is the 'supreme governing body'. Council membership includes two student members who are the current President of the Students' Union and the President of the Undeb Myfyrwyr Cymraeg Aberystwyth (Welsh Students' Union).

20 The Senate, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, is the University's academic authority, and is responsible to the Council for the academic functions of the University. The Senate reports to the Council through annual Quality Assurance Statements every December, which include a summary of routine quality assurance activities such as external examiners' reports and complaints and appeals, as well as key issues arising, accompanied by a risk rating. A submission from the Students' Union is also included as part of this annual report, which gives a more detailed overview of student feedback received in the last year and the functioning of the student representative system. The Senate is made up of the University's five Pro Vice-Chancellors, the chair of the University's branch of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and the Head of the Graduate School as well as representatives of the academic departments and three student members who are elected officers of the Students' Union.

21 The Senate oversees a series of key committees, three of which have responsibility for areas of the UK Quality Code. These are the Recruitment and Marketing Board who oversee areas relating to admissions, the Collaborative Provision Board who oversee areas relating to partnerships and the Academic Board who are responsible for all remaining areas, including the responsibility of reviewing the effectiveness of the University's quality and enhancement processes. The Academic Board is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Learning, Teaching and the Student Experience, and has a total of eight subcommittees, of which three are Faculty Academic Affairs Committees (FAAC). Other subcommittees of the Academic Board include the Academic Enhancement Committee, Student Experience Committee, Portfolio Planning Committee, Welsh Medium Studies Committee, and Research Degrees Committee.

22 The three FAACs have a key role in the University's management of academic standards and quality, and are chaired by the respective Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellors. They are responsible for the internal scrutiny of external examiner reports and issues arising, annual monitoring of taught schemes, NSS action plans and oversight of professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation of schemes, which are considered by Academic Board. On behalf of Academic Board, they manage minor changes to programmes such as changes to the programme structures. They are also responsible for approving new and restructured modules, or the suspension and withdrawal of modules. Their role also includes the implementation of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, student experience and support such as module evaluation and student representation. Quality and standards issues raised in departmental meetings, as well as those raised by students, are also considered by the FAACs.

23 The student representative system is also key for the involvement of students in the quality system. Student representatives are trained by the Students' Union and their primary means of interacting with the quality system is through Staff Student Consultative Committees (SSCCs), where staff and students meet to discuss current issues. Faculty-level student representatives also sit on the FAACs. There are also forums specifically for postgraduate research (PGR) student representatives to voice their concerns, primarily the Research Students' Consultative Group which reports to the Research Degrees Committee. Student representatives, either course/faculty representatives or Students' Union elected officers, are included in the University's general deliberative committees, which allows for student concerns to be faithfully represented at points of high-level decision making.

24 Aside from the student representative system there are several means of engaging students in the quality system. These include annual student surveys such as the NSS, module evaluation questionnaires (MEQs) and 'light' module evaluation questionnaires which are a means of collecting mid-module feedback and were introduced in 2020-21. The results of these surveys are considered by course leaders, and lead to module-level action plans, which are reviewed as a collective by the Director of Teaching and Learning in order to identify trends. The University also intends to participate in both the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey this academic year, after not participating for the past two years due to concerns about low response rates during the pandemic. As well as surveys, the University has an anonymous student feedback system named 'Tell Us Now' which allows students to submit comments at any time of the year on any topic. All of these feedback mechanisms are fed into the quality system through either the SSCCs or through the FAACs.

2.2 Key features of the approach to setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards

25 The University has an appropriate framework for setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards. Its committee structure supports effective oversight of standards. Senate, the academic authority of the University, is responsible to Council for the academic functions of the University in teaching and research and the regulation of the academic interests of the students. In discharging these responsibilities, Senate works through its subcommittees, namely Academic Board, Collaborative Provision Board, Recruitment and Marketing Board, Research Committee, Senate Exam Board and University Research Ethics Committee.

26 Academic Board is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the academic standards and quality of programmes, supported by its subcommittees which include Research Degrees Committee (RDC) with overall responsibility for research degree provision including the oversight of standards, and the three Faculty Academic Affairs Committees (FAACs) which play a key role in quality assurance. Collaborative Provision Board manages, quality assures and has oversight of the University's collaborative activities. The review team found that committees have clearly defined terms of reference and membership; minutes are comprehensive and demonstrate diligent oversight of standards.

27 The comprehensive Academic Quality Handbook (AQH) incorporates quality assurance policies and processes and regulations and, as confirmed through meetings with staff, supports the effective oversight of academic standards. Following the University restructuring in 2018, all administrative staff supporting learning and teaching were brought together under a single Academic Registry, with some staff located in faculties along with a number of central teams. In meetings with the review team, staff confirmed the greater resilience and consistency this change has brought about.

28 The University has in place, and effectively implements, a number of processes for setting and maintaining standards. Standards are initially set through module and study scheme development and approval processes, overseen by Academic Board, FAACs and the Portfolio Planning Committee. Design and development of modules and study schemes take account of a range of external reference points, ensure that learning outcomes are set and assessed at the appropriate levels and involve consultation with students, external examiners, subject specialists and PSRBs. Major changes to study schemes or developments in a new area of provision, requiring sign off by the University Executive, are approved through the 'Executive approval pathway' and considered by the Standing Scheme Approval Panel; an external subject specialist provides input through a written report prior to the panel meeting. The 'Non-Executive approval pathway' is utilised for study scheme proposals which are a development within an existing area, with proposals considered at faculty level. Where PSRBs are involved, approval events may be held jointly between the University and PSRB.

29 Academic standards are reviewed through annual monitoring and periodic review processes. Annual monitoring of taught schemes (AMTS) is overseen by Academic Board. AMTS provide assurance that study schemes are meeting their aims and that standards are being maintained. Scheme-level reports consider external examiner and student feedback and include action plans, with the previous year's actions being reported on; data packs are provided for schemes where numbers are statistically relevant. Faculty-level reports provide a summary of key issues such as good practice, innovation, risk to standards or quality and those needing University-level attention. Periodic review, occurring every five to six years, is conducted at departmental level and includes the periodic revalidation of academic provision. The process covers taught undergraduate and postgraduate schemes and modules, postgraduate research and collaborative provision, and a range of matters are considered including student feedback systems, compliance with quality assurance processes and staff development and training. Review panels include an external member and outcomes are considered by Academic Board, with follow-up actions being identified and taken.

30 Assessment policies and practices ensure that standards are being maintained in line with sector expectations. Students studying through the medium of Welsh are normally examined in Welsh and students studying through the medium of English are also entitled to be assessed in Welsh. The University's policy on the translation of assessed work ensures the integrity of the process. The AQH sets out the procedures for dealing with unacceptable academic practice and the review team heard in meetings about the work being undertaken by the University and the Students' Union to raise awareness of, and provide training for staff in relation to, contract cheating.

31 Feedback on assessed work is expected to be provided to students within 15 working days or an explanation given. The review team, however, heard from students that there is considerable variation in the application of this policy across the departments and this was also raised in the student submission. The University noted that, when first introduced, there was more intensive monitoring of compliance with the policy, but now it is well embedded and understood by staff, who stated in meetings with the review team that it is not an issue commonly raised by students. Nonetheless, students are clearly experiencing variability in the timeliness of feedback provided and therefore the review team **recommends** that the University should ensure all students receive timely assessment feedback in line with University requirements.

32 External examiners play a key role in assuring that standards are set and maintained at an appropriate level. For taught awards, external examiners are asked to comment on the academic standards of awards, to confirm whether standards are set at an appropriate level for the award and are consistent with the standards of other UK higher

education institutions and with national qualifications frameworks. Examiners may submit reports in Welsh and departments are then expected to respond to comments bilingually. The evidence provided to the review team demonstrated that external examiners confirm that standards are appropriate, are in line with those of similar institutions, meet sector expectations and that action is taken as a result of their feedback; departments make full responses to any issues raised. Academic Board considers summaries of external examiner reports compiled by faculties; these summaries also outline responses to issues raised and highlight issues which need further consideration by FAACs or Academic Board. External examiner nominations for taught programmes are approved through Academic Board. However, the review team confirmed in meetings with senior staff that the Head of the Graduate School approves nominations for external examiners for research degrees. The University also confirmed that there is no additional institutional oversight of the approval process, meaning that ultimately the process is reliant on individuals. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the University implement a system that ensures institutional oversight for the approval of external examiners for research degree awards.

33 In line with recent developments in the sector, the University is currently reviewing its degree algorithm. The University confirmed that it is generally satisfied that its practice complies with the principles of good algorithm design but that there are some elements, such as the rounding of module marks and the overall average, which may not be in line with the new guidance and which are currently being reviewed.

2.3 Use of external reference points in quality processes

34 The University uses a range of external reference points in its quality processes. Awards are aligned with the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications, degree characteristics statements and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales as part of the module and programme approval process. A number of courses are also accredited by PSRBs. Undergraduate and taught postgraduate study schemes have been reviewed against Subject Benchmark Statements and the University confirmed that departments are asked to confirm that they remain in line with the relevant benchmark statements when these change or when the department undergoes periodic review. All proposals for new or revised study schemes require completion of a programme specification with a specific reference to the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement. The review team found that, although programme specifications are readily available on the University's website and conform to a common template, a number of these specifications contained out-of-date references, no reference or broken links to Subject Benchmark Statements. The University confirmed that the current format on the website is outdated and makes it difficult to keep the specifications up to date and that a project is ongoing to change the format to facilitate more regular updating. Consequently, the review team **affirms** the steps being undertaken by the University to ensure programme specifications are kept up to date.

35 Whilst the University provided a comprehensive mapping of some of its policies and procedures against the Quality Code and ESG and demonstrated how other policies and processes, such as support for students' learning, align with the ESG, a complete mapping document was not provided. The University confirmed that its quality assurance policies and procedures have been established with the Quality Code as the principal external reference point with the AQH making reference to the Code. The University reviews its AQH on an annual basis to ensure that its policies and procedures and practice align with sector expectations and, where major changes are made to the Quality Code or other relevant external reference points, convenes a working group or utilises the Associate Deans group to consider the changes. Changes to the AQH are reported to Academic Board.

36 The University makes appropriate use of external examiners (see Section 2.2) and external subject specialists provide external input to study scheme approval and departmental periodic review processes.

2.4 Commentary on action taken since the previous review and identification of matters arising from the Prior Information Pack not otherwise explored

37 As outlined in Section 1.4, the University made a full response to the recommendations from the previous QAA review and developed an action plan in relation to the recommendations within the student submission. The current student submission commented on the actions taken and identified 27 new recommendations, some of which reflected issues raised in the 2015 submission, including the inconsistent application of the personal tutoring system and the timing of feedback on assessment. The University made a full response and developed a new action plan to address the current recommendations.

38 In 2020, the University adjusted its teaching and assessment practices in response to the pandemic. Amendments to regulations and other matters were overseen by a working group, reporting to Academic Board, the latter retaining oversight of all changes and any issues arising. The working group recommended that awards were based on completed credits, with a built-in 'safety net' allowing students who qualified for awards but were not satisfied with their results, or did not pass, to resit credits for full marks to improve the class of degree or year average, with only improved results counting. Students, external examiners and collaborative partners were kept informed of changes and assessment boards held online. Training for staff and ongoing support for staff and students in relation to online teaching and assessment was provided by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit.

39 In 2020-21, the University moved to a blended delivery approach and pandemic related quality assurance issues were taken forward by the Associate Deans group and through additional meetings of FAACs. The Faculty PVCs and Associate Deans (Welsh medium) conducted separate impact assessments for Welsh medium provision. Assessments in lieu of on-site examinations were held during the year, which the student submission suggested should continue where appropriate. Postgraduate dissertations were covered by the uncapped resit policy and PGTs were able to submit a COVID Impact form with their dissertations, outlining how the work had been affected by pandemic restrictions.

40 Some research students were able to apply for funding extensions through their funding bodies and HEFCW funding was secured for students funded by the University. For other students, applications for extensions due to the pandemic were looked at sympathetically without the normal evidence requirements. PGRs could submit a COVID impact form with their thesis to inform examiners of changes to the methodology, data collection or other aspect of the work due to COVID. The University also moved to online vivas where necessary.

41 Towards the latter half of 2020-21, the University ended most of these temporary arrangements, albeit with some flexibility around special circumstances. Students on taught programmes who met the review team generally commented positively on the arrangements made but also noted that, as the pandemic was ongoing, they should have continued for longer.

42 The University published its first-degree Outcome statement in June 2020 and updated it in June 2021. The statements show an overall increase in First-Class and Upper-Second-Class degrees from 69% in 2015-16 to 82% in 2019-20, a rise of 13%. The University notes four main reasons for this: fewer exams and more continuous assessment

as a result of the pandemic; a growing number of 4-year Integrated master's schemes requiring students to achieve higher averages to progress; a tightening of the progression rules allowing students to repeat the second year for full marks meaning a decrease in retention of students likely to achieve lower marks; an increase in the effectiveness, timeliness and thoroughness of assessment and feedback (although this was not reflected in the comments of some students met by the review team – see paragraph 31) and a reduction in the student/staff ratio during this period. Good Honours reports are reviewed at FAACs and at Academic Board and are now included in the annual quality assurance statement to Council.

2.5 Approach to using data to inform decision-making and evaluation

43 The University uses data in a variety of formats and contexts to inform decision-making and evaluation across different levels of its quality system, and across the different activities conducted through it. This ranges from institution-wide overviews to individual-level student data.

44 The Planning Department is the driver of data provision about the whole student body and institutional picture. The department provides data through an interactive data dashboard on key performance indicators and future targets that is available to senior staff in academic departments, for instance detailing regular information about student withdrawals, recruitment and attainment. This shows University-wide information but filters can be applied to consider the data by faculty, department, or mode and year of study. The Planning Department works to encourage use of these resources for decision making and data literacy amongst its staff by providing training and regular demonstrations. They also produce other institutional-level reports for committee consideration.

45 Data is also reported and used across the deliberative committees, from Faculty Academic Affairs Committees to reports to the Executive. Data on degree outcomes is monitored by entry tariff, gender, disability and ethnicity and is presented to Senate, and the Research Degrees Committee oversees data on PGR submission rates, completions and withdrawals. At an institutional level, the Academic Enhancement Committee, a subcommittee of the Academic Board, has oversight of the effectiveness of student feedback processes including the NSS and MEQs.

46 As well as the relevant departmental staff being able to make use of the dashboards produced by the Planning Department, at a departmental level one of the primary uses of data is through the Annual Monitoring of Taught Schemes process. Data packs are a required part of this quality process which include information about employability, module marks, entry tariffs and NSS scores for the past year, which ensures that relevant data is reviewed regularly. Themes across module action plans are then collated by Directors of Learning and Teaching into departmental action plans. These are overseen by Faculty Academic Affairs Committees and reported to Academic Board. Thematic analysis of qualitative comments obtained in the MEQ surveys are also used to draw out wider themes which then inform module and departmental action plans.

47 Staff working in student-facing roles, such as personal tutors, can also make use of the in-house systems that give overview information about the progress of taught students, their use of learning resources and attendance. These systems enable staff to quickly see whether there is a cause for concern regarding individual students, as well as to set up lists to monitor students who may need additional support, and enhancements to these capabilities are overseen by the users' group for the student record system.

2.6 Effectiveness of how approaches to quality are used to improve and enhance learning and teaching

48 Learning and teaching at Aberystwyth University is enhanced and improved by quality processes that are enacted through the deliberative committee structure, through activities such as the Annual Monitoring of Taught Schemes, and through the Student Representative system. The University also put in additional support during the pandemic in the form of a COVID Implementation Group in Learning and Teaching and Assessment to ensure approaches to quality were maintained and responsive to staff and student needs. The University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit were also then able to provide professional development support to staff in the transition to online learning.

49 The review team saw multiple examples at school, faculty and institutional levels of how the collection of student feedback data through MEQs and liaison with student representatives led to enhancements and improvements to the quality of teaching and learning that students receive, from improved marking on a module level, to difficulties with transitions to online teaching and learning and to co-working with the Students' Union throughout the pandemic. Whilst this was evidenced in minutes and reports, some students who met the review team commented that when actions were taken forwards beyond faculty-level to higher level committees, the results were often not reported back to students.

50 The action plans developed on the basis of the MEQ system are core to the improvement and enhancement of learning and teaching. Additionally, those action plans developed on the basis of annual monitoring processes further include synthesis of recommendations from external examiners, and data collected in order to benchmark as described in Section 2.5, with areas of good practice and improvement shared across departments.

51 The Welsh language is an important facet of the quality systems relating to learning and teaching at the University, which is supported by an institutional commitment to the Welsh language. The review team heard that the accessibility of teaching and learning through the medium of Welsh was particularly valued by those working and studying at the University. For non-Welsh speaking staff and students there were Welsh language lessons available and engagement with this was encouraged by both the University and colleagues. As such, the review team **commends** the readily accessible and embedded support for staff teaching and assessing through Welsh language medium as well as staff and students learning Welsh that encourages engagement and participation with the language.

52 As part of the teaching and learning system at the University, all students on taught programmes are allocated a personal tutor who provides academic support and signposting for pastoral issues. Students who met the review team reported variation in the availability of their personal tutors, their ability to signpost them to the services the University provides, and the attention paid to issues they raised. The review team noted that concerns about the effectiveness of the personal tutoring system had also been raised in the Students' Union submission. The review team did hear about new initiatives that are being developed to better support personal tutors to assist their students, but it was unclear how the University would assure itself that the personal tutoring system was functioning equitably and as intended across its departments and faculties. As such, the review team **recommends** that the University ensure effective oversight of the uptake and engagement of staff and students with the requirements of the personal tutoring system.

2.7 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards

53 The University has effective arrangements in place for securing academic standards. Its well-defined committee structure supports the oversight of standards and

regular reporting from its subcommittees helps assure Senate that standards are being maintained. Senate reviews the University's comprehensive annual quality assurance statement which reports on standards and quality assurance and enhancement, prior to its submission to Council; the statement ensures Council has sufficient information to complete the annual assurance statement to HEFCW. The AQH provides a comprehensive and accessible source of policies, regulations and procedures which support the management of academic standards and quality.

54 Standards are initially set through study scheme development and approval processes which ensure alignment with relevant external reference. The University assures itself that standards are being maintained through its robust annual monitoring and periodic review processes, overseen by Academic Board. RDC maintains oversight of the standards of research degrees and receives regular reports on PGR students' progression and pass rates, as well as feedback from external examiners.

55 External examiners play a key role in the oversight of standards (see Section 2.2) and, if necessary, can raise concerns directly with the Vice-Chancellor. External examiner reports comment specifically on the academic standards of awards, confirm whether standards set are appropriate for the level of the award and are consistent with the standards of other UK higher education institutions and with national qualifications frameworks.

56 In line with the sector, the University has recently reviewed its degree algorithm and is currently considering several developments. Since the previous review, the University has also made changes to its assessment regulations and practices, including revisions to the Ordinary degree award, removal of the 'wiping the slate clean' option which allowed students to restart Level 5 afresh, with all previous marks being cancelled, and changes to PGT regulations allowing students more flexibility in retrieving failure. Appropriate arrangements were made during the pandemic to ensure standards were maintained whilst being sympathetic to the student experience (see Section 2.4).

2.8 Effectiveness of the provider's approach to self-evaluation, including the effective use of data to inform decision-making

57 The University identified the annual production of the Quality Assurance Report for Council as a key part of their annual consolidation of trends and notable events in their quality assurance cycles. These reports provide an annual opportunity for the University to self-evaluate its quality and enhancement processes. To assist with decision making and self-evaluation the University reports on key areas of quality assurance with risk rating, which helps to assess if particular areas of the quality system would benefit from further attention. More regularly, the University evaluates the data described in Section 2.5 to inform its quality systems, which can be seen through its deliberative committees, annual monitoring and periodic review processes for taught schemes. This leads to annual updates to the Academic Quality Handbook.

58 Some of the University's recent approaches to using data have developed from their increased use of digital systems, such as the use of internet-based text-matching software that assists with plagiarism detection and which allows for automatic recording of student submission times, or enhanced learning analytics measured through engagement with digital learning systems. Further planned implementation of digital systems, such as applications for special circumstances for students, will increase the ease with which the University can use data for increased oversight of their processes, and subsequent evaluation. One of the primary systems currently being implemented is a new PGR management system, which will allow for supervision, annual reviews and processes such as changing supervisor to be monitored more easily and consistently. During the review visit the team met with PGR

students who had had inconsistent experiences of supervision and annual monitoring processes, with some reporting they had not had an annual review for several years. Given this inconsistency, and the benefits of implementing the new PGR monitoring system for resolving such issues, the review team **affirms** the programme of work the University is undertaking to develop a new digital system which will allow enhanced institutional oversight of the experience of postgraduate research students.

3 Collaborative provision

3.1 Key features of the provider's strategic approach (to include collaborative activity, online and distance learning where delivered with others, and work-based learning)

59 The review team learnt that following the University-wide restructure in 2018 partnership provision oversight was strengthened through a redesigned Academic Partnerships Office that is now responsible for the quality assurance of collaborative partnership activities which result wholly or in part in an Aberystwyth University award. The University is committed to building strong relationships with partners within the UK and internationally, who share its vision and ethos for delivering high-quality research-led teaching and an exceptional student experience. The University strives to ensure excellence in quality and delivery in supporting the University to deliver globally accessible collaborative programmes that prepare students with appropriate life-long skills, which are relevant to both local and global communities.

60 The review team learnt that the Academic Partnerships Office operates a risk-based approach and manages medium to high-risk collaborative projects itself. The Academic Partnerships Office monitors risk levels including aspects of programme, qualification, financial and legal noncompliance. It is working on the development of a qualitative and quantitative risk assessment methodology designed to focus on the areas of highest risk to the University through quality assurance benchmarking and regulatory monitoring systems.

61 As well as risk and contractual obligations, the Academic Partnerships Office is responsible for quality assurance and standards of delivery through partnership arrangements. The Academic Partnerships Office is responsible for the policies and processes regarding approval, due diligence and risk assessment, monitoring and management of collaborative partnership activities and is responsible for the Academic Quality Handbook section on Collaborative Provision. Partnership-related processes, rules and regulations have been updated in line with the QAA-revised UK Quality Code as well as the Collaborative Provision chapter of the Academic Quality Handbook which was finalised and approved for publication in April 2020.

62 The Academic Partnerships Office staff serve as secretary to the Collaborative Provision Board (CPB) which reports directly to Senate - this includes progress briefings on collaborative projects to each Collaborative Provision Board meeting and the Annual Partnerships Report. For Council, the Academic Partnerships Office produces the partnerships section of the Annual Quality Assurance Statement and the Annual Partnerships Report. For the University, the Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee and the Governance and Compliance Committee, the Academic Partnerships Office produces reports on those projects which are at risk of non-compliance or where other forms of risk have been identified.

63 The review team learnt that low to medium risk partnership arrangements such as continuing professional development and credit-bearing work-based learning sit within faculties. Lower risk recruitment partnerships (through both standard and advanced entry, such as progression agreements) and student mobility partnerships (such as exchanges, study abroad and Erasmus programmes) are managed through the Global Opportunities (GO) and International Recruitment and Development (IRD) divisions within the Global Marketing and Student Recruitment department. These are reported through the Recruitment and Marketing Board, which in turn reports directly to Senate.

64 The dedicated Academic Partnerships Office manages high-risk partnership projects such as franchise, validation and dual/joint degree agreements and medium-risk

collaborations that result in the award of the University credit, credit transfer towards a University award or credit or module validation by the University. These medium-risk projects are usually student-mobility orientated partnerships - including articulation arrangements.

65 The Academic Partnerships Office facilitates the scoping of new partnership ideas, completes initial due diligence and risk assessments and liaises closely with the Finance Office regarding the relevant partnership business case. The team also supports faculties in the conduct of site visits and the submission of proposals to the relevant committees for partnership, module and scheme approval. Additionally, the Academic Partnerships Office facilitates the negotiation and drafting of contractual agreements and, after successful partnership set-up, the team enables faculties to monitor the academic standards and quality assurance of the partnership and oversee the operational management of partnership delivery. The Academic Partnerships team also facilitates the negotiation of partnership renewal and/or termination.

66 The team learnt that the University recently reviewed and updated the section of the AQH on work-based learning (WBL) and placements. The section relates to study schemes and modules that include opportunities for work-based learning. The aim of WBL is to enable students to gain meaningful experiences in a setting that will promote the enhancement of career prospects; this requires close working with employers.

67 The placement section of the AQH sets out a proportionate approach to the management of work-based learning through a formal agreement. It ensures that appropriate procedures are in place to provide work-based learning of high quality that assures the student experience and meets the learning outcomes at scheme or module level, and clarifies the responsibilities and rights of the employer, University and student when a student is on placement. The handbook also covers the approval and review processes to assure quality, standards and the student experience, including a safe environment provided for the student, with responsibilities on staff, students and providers. It sets out requirements for monitoring the student's progress. The faculties also have oversight responsibilities to ensure that students are adequately prepared for work-based learning with a pre-placement programme, supported and assessed appropriately and with clear learning outcomes.

68 At the review meeting with students, students who had been on placement confirmed that they receive assistance in securing a placement and that support is available for them throughout the placement should they require it. Students are assigned an academic tutor who visits the students at pre-agreed points such as the commencement of the placement, mid-way through and at the end of the placement. Students can also contact the tutor at any time during the placement and should any issues arise they are dealt with expeditiously.

3.2 Information on the extent and nature of collaborative provision and plans for change

69 The review team learnt that the University is looking to increase its collaborative provision. The Global Marketing and Student Recruitment department is working to enhance international applications and recruitment and this has already led to an increase in applications following a decline in applications post Brexit. International applications have increased with the development of MBA programmes into a new portfolio of Professional MBA programmes which have been specifically designed to meet the demands and needs of students from various international regions.

70 There has also been expansion in distance learning and part-time PGT provision over recent sessions. These schemes make provision available to professionals in

employment within Wales and beyond. The part-time MA Education (Wales) similarly makes PGT provision available to teaching professionals in Wales. The University is currently reviewing the feasibility of expanding distance learning provision.

71 At present, the Academic Partnerships Office is overseeing three franchise agreements, two dual/joint degrees, one validation and a small number of other collaborative partnership arrangements in Wales and internationally. The University has franchise agreements with both Coleg Cambria and Coleg Gwent and with Brickfields Asia College. It has a validation agreement with Menter a Busnes and recently approved a joint undergraduate degree (BVSc Veterinary Science) with the Royal Veterinary College. There is a University programme to which the University of Wales Trinity Saint David contributes two modules and a dual PGT degree with American University although this has yet to recruit. The review team learnt that there are currently two partnerships which are being terminated.

72 The University also participates in a number of doctoral training centres/partnerships. In all cases, students are registered for the degree at one partner, and are monitored and examined by that university and hence subject to its rules and regulations and admissions procedures. As well as providing funding and distinctive learning opportunities for doctoral students, the partnerships provide extra training and development activities over and above the researcher development activities offered by the University. Funded industrial and other placements are also increasingly available as part of these partnerships, as well as collaborative doctoral awards where a partner outside higher education is involved with the project. The review team met some students who were participants on some of these schemes. The University continues to be responsible for all of the quality assurance arrangements around the PhD project in these cases.

73 Students confirmed that they are offered a wide range of opportunities which include placements of varying durations, opportunities to study or work abroad and international exchange. The review team learnt that the University offers a wide range of opportunities to volunteer or work in another country for any duration which includes an academic year, a single semester or a few weeks during holidays. Students on most degrees can go abroad for a semester in their second year of study or for the whole year of study. Students on a degree with an integrated year abroad go abroad in their third year of study.

74 Students on a modern languages degree live abroad in their third year, and study or work in the countries of the main languages of study. Students on a degree with an integrated third year in industry can do part or all of the year abroad. Students on any degree can also go on a short programme.

75 At the review, students confirmed that they are provided with help and assistance to locate and source a suitable placement and while on their placement they are supported by a tutor who visits them and keeps in contact with them while on placement. Prior to going out on international placements, students receive cultural awareness workshops. On their return from international placement or studies the students are offered skills awareness workshops which enable them to reflect on their experiences of their studies abroad they can use in interviews and when they apply for jobs when they graduate. The team learnt that for 2021-22, a Draft Placements Policy will inform operations and placements will be recorded on the TARGETconnect database. The Draft Placements Policy will be taken to Academic Board in September 2022. The team learnt that the University wants to increase the number of global opportunities which are currently made available to students.

76 The University wants to take maximum advantage of new funding that has recently come online and to take advantage of shorter opportunities, for example opportunities during summer vacations, to give students an insight into the opportunities which are available for

them. The University is currently working on the Taith bid which will both allow and facilitate reciprocity with partner universities in Europe.

77 The review team learnt that developments in academic partnerships largely align with the broadly defined University plans in a number of areas. These are: to improve international reputation through trust in high-quality and student advancing partnership activities in transnational education to facilitate growth in international student recruitment; investment in the communities in which the University sits through rural initiatives such as veterinary medicine and nursing to support Welsh government targets; expansion in vocationally focused provision to bridge the skills shortages; and new further education partner provider provision, including Foundation degrees; and continuing professional development such as partnerships within Wales. The team found that the University is working on a focused Further Education Strategy with a working group established to look at the balance of provision between HE and FE and the 'lifelong learner journey'. Related areas for future exploration include micro-credentials, CPD delivery and distance and blended-learning delivery. The review team **commends** the responsiveness of the University to national and regional employability needs through the development of new focused and innovative partnerships.

3.3 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative provision including arrangements for securing academic standards and improvement and enhancement of the student learning experience

78 The team learnt that responsibility for management and oversight of collaborative partnership activities that results in an Aberystwyth University degree award is carried out by the Collaborative Provision Board (CPB) which reports directly to Senate. The board brings together colleagues from across the University with responsibility for both UK and international partnership and collaborative arrangements. CPB is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor Learning, Teaching and Student Experience. In addition to scrutinising, approving and recommending approval for these activities, CPB also undertakes reviews of agreements and memoranda of understanding. Additionally, CPB is in receipt of partnership-related development strategies and the formal monitoring and review mechanisms relating to academic partnership delivery, such as joint programme minutes, link tutor reports and annual monitoring of partner taught schemes. The annual review of documentation related to this culminate in the Annual Report on Collaborative Partnerships for each high-risk project under the remit of the Academic Partnerships Office.

79 The purpose of the Annual Report on Collaborative Partnerships is to provide Aberystwyth University's governing body and key stakeholders with appropriate evidence to be able to confirm that the University has and continues to meet its obligations in respect of quality assurance in partnership arrangements. For Council, the Academic Partnerships Office produces the Partnerships section of the annual Quality Assurance Statement and the Annual Report on Collaborative Partnerships. The Academic Partnerships Office produces reports for two Council subcommittees, the Audit, Risk and Assurance Committee and the Governance and Compliance Committee.

80 The team found that the Academic Partnerships Office is responsible for quality assurance and standards of delivery through partnership arrangements as well as risk and contractual obligations. The Academic Partnerships Office is also responsible for the policies and processes regarding approval, due diligence and risk assessment, monitoring and management of collaborative partnership activities and is responsible for the Academic Quality Handbook section on Academic Partnerships. Academic Partnerships Office staff serve as secretary to the Collaborative Provision Board. This includes preparing project briefings for each new partnership. The Academic Partnerships Office continually reviews its interactions with University strategies including the Strategic Plan 2018-23 and related

strategies and action plans such as the action plan with the Marketing and Student Recruitment Strategy.

81 The AQH provides staff with the relevant information and guidance on the approval, due diligence, risk assessment, monitoring, management and cessation of collaborative partnership activities. It also complements the new Executive approval process for business cases related to collaborative partnership projects. The updated policies and processes have embedded partnership activities into the standard operational quality assurance processes while also facilitating identification and record of those distinctively collaborative activities. These include enabling partners to engage with standard quality assurance processes including the Annual Monitoring of University Taught Schemes, MEQs and external examiner reports through additional sections of the forms specifically devised for partnership activities.

82 Additional levels of monitoring and management are through a bespoke partnership Operations Manual, bi-annual Joint Programme Boards and link tutor visit reports, as well as a new and more robust Partner Performance Evaluation. Staff at partner colleges confirmed that they engage with these processes.

83 At the meetings with both collaborative staff and students, the team found that both the staff and students are well supported by the University. The link tutor visits the respective partner sites twice a year to discuss the respective programme of study and produces a report which is fed back to the Academic Partnerships Office. Students are also able to avail themselves of the library at the University and have access to the University's e-resources. Students are provided with many opportunities to feed back on their course through MEQs and through meetings with the relevant link tutor, as well as through the formal and informal mechanisms of the college itself.

84 Partner college staff are also well supported and are invited to the annual Teaching and Learning Conference held at the University and are offered updated CPD VLE training as well as subject-specific training if required. Partner college staff were very pleased with the support they get from the University. The partners all felt very well supported during the pandemic. Communication works well and all policies and procedures are communicated to them in a timely manner. In conclusion, the review team **commends** the supportive and collegiate relationship the University develops with its partners that enables them to participate as equals in the partnership.

QAA2669 - R13106 - July 22

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester, GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
www.qaa.ac.uk