

**To: Heads of higher education
institutions in Wales**

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LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES 2003/04 – SUMMARY

Institutions will be preparing updated learning and teaching strategies for the three-year period 2004/05 to 2006/07 (Circular W04/28HE). As 2003/04 therefore marked the end of the previous three-year planning cycle, we have prepared a summary of the main themes and developments which institutions reported to us in their strategies for 2003/04. I hope you find this helpful.

Yours sincerely

PROFESSOR PHILIP GUMMETT

LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES 2003/04

The summary below is not intended to provide a comprehensive account of all the activities which institutions in Wales are undertaking through their learning and teaching strategies, but rather to draw out some of the main themes and developments.

PLANNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Learning and Teaching Strategies have become an integral part of the activities of higher education institutions in Wales. Institutions generally have well established committee structures for revising, monitoring and evaluating their strategies, and a clearly identified member of senior management with overall responsibility for ensuring implementation.

In many instances, a feature of the strategies is the preparation by the departments/schools of their own learning and teaching strategies, often under the aegis of a departmental learning and teaching committee and sometimes with a champion to take the strategy forward. Within the overall framework of institutional priorities, these strategies then in their turn inform the development of the main institutional learning and teaching strategy.

SCOPE OF THE STRATEGIES

There is a recognition that learning and teaching impacts on almost every aspect of institutional activity, and that it is supported from several HEFCW funding streams as well as mainstream institutional grant. For instance, strategies refer to the progress which has been possible in improving information and technology equipment and facilities and the quality and appropriateness of teaching and learning space through the Council's Capital Funding for Learning and Teaching and IT Infrastructure over the last few years. Some make reference to the Welsh Assembly Government's Reconfiguration and Collaboration agenda for higher education.

Employability is a major theme. Most strategies include sections on widening access, provision for disabled students, Race Equality Policies and Action Plans and, in some institutions, Welsh medium provision. However, the extent to which these impact on the core of the learning and teaching strategy, rather than simply being a summary of separate strategies for these aspects varies. Examples are the extent to which the strategy reflects widening access and retention issues in the consideration of the delivery of provision and the assessment of students, or how far bilingualism/Welsh medium is taken into account in support and information services, innovation, and staff development.

There is growing appreciation of the role of pedagogic research and using case studies and evidence from pilots and projects to inform future developments

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND STANDARDS FRAMEWORK AND QAA CODE OF PRACTICE

A wealth of information is presented on the variety of ways that learning and teaching strategies connect to internal and external quality assurance activities. Evidence of an institutional commitment to continuous quality enhancement is welcomed, particularly in view of the Council's decision to develop a 'light touch' review process for Wales alongside the sector and the QAA. Institutions are encouraged to continue this emphasis on continuous quality improvement as part of their Institutional Review preparations. Additionally, it is reassuring to note that institutions have been active in monitoring engagement with the 'QAA Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education' across many facets of University life.

ASSESSMENT

Considerable work is going on in the sector on developing assessment methods and criteria and reviewing and revising institutional policies or regulations. There is a strong emphasis on ensuring consistency and greater transparency and understanding by students and teachers.

The work on assessment is integral to the continuing activity in several institutions on developing programme specifications and learning outcomes. Departments are developing specific criteria for each type of assessment which may be used in a particular course or module. Development work is also being undertaken on computer-aided assessment, with a view to improving feedback to students and providing indications of student engagement. Appropriate assessment for provision which is delivered through managed-learning environments or e-learning-based distance learning is also a prominent topic. Staff development programmes and workshops are also highlighted, covering such topics as good practice, plagiarism, ethics, unfair practice and assessing key skills. One institution notes that it is working with the NUS to training student representatives to improve understanding of assessment methods and regulations. Another institution took assessment as a theme for a year, reviewing policies and practices and engaging in an institution-wide programme of consultation, staff development and seminars, and funding for innovative projects. This was to be followed by dissemination of the outcomes of this year of concerted activity across the institution.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING, SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY

Work on Personal Development Planning (PDP) and Progress Files for students is a significant theme in the strategies. Some institutions are further down the road, either implementing their policies in phased stages or setting up programmes to do this in the near future. Others are identifying what practices already exist and what possible models and structures might best suit their institution and students.

Activities include audits of specific and generic skills and embedding these in the curriculum, developing approaches to experiential learning, reflective practice and recording achievement. There are skills development programmes for students, including information management and handling, project management, information technology. Several institutions refer to enabling students to obtain the European Computer Driving Licence, including the availability of a Welsh language version.

PDP is closely linked with employability, work experience and career development, and integrated approaches are evident in the strategies. The achievements of the sector in the area of work experience and employability have been highlighted on a number of occasions, gaining attention on a UK-wide front. There is a focus on identifying the skills and elements within courses which contribute to employability and bringing these to the attention of students, for example, through marketing, course handbooks and institutional intranets. There are career management skills/development programmes and modules and increased use of website support. There is continuing work on evaluating and surveying work-experience programmes and enabling students to reflect, recognise and document their experience. Accrediting work-experience and extra-curricular skills, or providing specific accredited work experience modules, also feature in some strategies. Some institutions also indicate how they seek to bring the work they are doing on employability for their students to the attention of employers, for example, through conferences and seminars. Institutions also note their involvement in the HEFCW GO Wales programme, including where they are leading on particular aspects.

EXCHANGING AND DISSEMINATING GOOD PRACTICE

A noticeable feature of the strategies is the range of activities, formal and informal, which enable good practice to be established, disseminated and subsequently introduced across the spectrum of learning and teaching. These include conferences, fora and seminars, websites and newsletters. The focus of these may be a particular theme, reflecting on internal experience or rolling out schemes or developments after a pilot phrase. However, there is also an emphasis on engaging more widely, through building links with other institutions both within Wales and across the UK. This is a two-way process with Welsh institutions being able to contribute their own experience and expertise as well as benefiting from the work of others. Involvement with the UK Learning and Teaching Support Network (now part of the new Higher Education Academy) is also becoming more evident. Some strategies

note the use they are making of their external examiners and their feedback to disseminate good practice and enhance the quality of learning and teaching.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

The encouragement of good practice is also a feature of staff development. The dissemination activities noted above are also supported by more specific training on particular aspects, such as assessment, managed and virtual learning environments, computer-assisted learning, student retention, employability and skills development, accrediting work-based learning, personal development planning for students.

Several of the strategies indicate progress in the development and introduction of peer observation of teaching. A feature of these is the need to ensure that staff are supportive, with schemes piloted or introduced in a phased programme and with the cooperation of relevant unions. Further development is being informed by evaluation and reflection on initial experience.

Institutions continued to encourage and support staff in becoming members of the Institute of Learning and Teaching HE (now transferred into the Higher Education Academy). The expectation or requirement for new staff to undertake a formal validated training programme/qualification for teaching in HE education (increasingly accredited by the ILTHE) is evident. This aspect will be incorporated within the activities of the HE Academy. Support and mentoring for new staff and identifying their individual training needs are also included.

Some institutions have introduced, or are considering, their own Teaching Fellowship or Awards schemes to encourage and recognise expertise and interest in learning and teaching and which reflect their own institutional priorities and circumstances.

USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

Institutions are at different stages in the implementation and exploitation of managed learning environments. Several strategies indicate the steps being taken to ensure a strategic and planned approach to the introduction or expansion of e-learning. Overall, institutions are reporting a substantial uptake in the use of Blackboard by staff and students with increasing numbers of course modules being added. Work is taking place to improve integration with student information management systems and to provide students with a personal information environment. Various pilot or innovative programmes are referred to, both in the context of use by campus-based students but also for distance learning and to enable delivery and support during work-based training and placements. There are also some references to promoting improved use of video-conferencing facilities.

It is evident that institutions are concerned to ensure that there is appropriate staff development and training in the use of managed learning environments and that best practice which enhances learning and teaching is employed. This covers such areas as designing and delivering programmes on line, assessment and quality assurance, evaluating on-line learning.

As well drawing on good practice at a UK or international level to inform their developments, institutions are actively reviewing and reflecting on their own experience. In some instances, where institutions are developing particular strengths and expertise, they are capitalising on these in terms of dissemination or research projects to raise their profile as significant players in e-learning and contribute to the wider development of best practice and innovation.

WIDENING ACCESS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

As noted above, the extent to which other aspects of activity related to learning and teaching, such as widening access, are integrated into learning and teaching strategies varies. Generally, at least a summary of the main points from the widening access strategies and plans for provision and support for disabled students are included. In some instances, certain aspects are seen as mainstream elements of the learning and teaching strategy. This applies particularly to activities to improve student retention. These include strengthening student support services, academic and pastoral, and making sure that students are aware of these. Some institutions refer to study skills support and

academic drop-in centres. Workshops and staff development programmes are provided for staff to enable them to identify problems at an early stage and to be able to provide appropriate support for students. Some institutions have also reviewed, or are reviewing their procedures and policies on student retention/drop-out to develop more pro-active and consistent approaches.

Institutions were requested to include a statement on how matters relevant to issues of race equality are being taken forward within the learning and teaching strategy. As with other related strategies and policies, the degree to which this area is becoming integral to the learning and teaching strategy varies. Institutions report on their overall progress in revising their policies and developing action plans in the light of feedback from the Equality Challenge Unit and refer to the existence of the Race Equality Policy as a separate document. However, not all strategies draw out the particular aspects of race equality policies which could be seen as pertinent to learning and teaching. This is an area which the Council would look to see developed further.

In some strategies, race equality is seen within the wider context of equal opportunities as a whole. The importance of student and staff awareness is recognised. Activities noted include the encouragement of debate amongst staff on areas such as race equality and support for disabled students, so that best practice can be recognised and disseminated. Work is also being undertaken on identifying staff development needs and providing workshops and seminars to meet these. One institution notes that a phased inclusion project is working with selected departments on issues relating to inclusive curriculum design and delivery. Audits of equality of opportunities and diversity issues are being undertaken, so that priorities and benchmarks can be set. Other developments noted include building links with local ethnic minority community groups, establishing networks for ethnic minority staff and students, and providing website information on equal opportunities. Another aspect is monitoring the progress of non-traditional students, including those from ethnic minorities.

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