

To: Heads of higher education institutions in  
Wales

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**IMPROVING STANDARDS IN POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES:  
STATEMENT OF PROGRESS**

I have pleasure in enclosing copies of a statement, issued jointly by the four UK higher education funding bodies, which summarises the outcomes of the formal consultation on proposed minimum standards for research degree programmes, and outlines the intended way forward.

**PROFESSOR PHILIP GUMMETT  
INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE**



18 February 2004

## **IMPROVING STANDARDS IN POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES: STATEMENT ON PROGRESS**

1. In May 2003, the four UK higher education funding bodies issued the formal consultation on 'Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes' (Circular W03/35HE). The key issues arising from the consultation are summarised in **Annex A**.
2. Responses demonstrated clear and continuing support for the principle that institutions should adopt high standards of supervision and training in order to qualify for postgraduate research funding.
3. A key concern centred around the introduction of a separate set of standards when a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) code on postgraduate research programmes already existed. Following the consultation with the sector and in light of subsequent discussions with the QAA, the funding bodies are now considering with QAA a possible way forward, under which minimum standards for postgraduate research degree programmes (RDPs) are embedded within the QAA code of practice. Key issues arising from the consultation will inform our discussions with the QAA. It is envisaged that work on the revision of the code of practice will be undertaken during the current academic year. This is in keeping with the funding bodies' commitment to announcing minimum standards for RDPs by the summer of 2004, prior to their implementation in 2005-06.
4. Each of the funding bodies will consider individually how to make the link between postgraduate RDP standards and funding in due course.

## **Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes – summary of consultation responses**

1. The funding bodies' formal consultation, 'Improving standards in postgraduate research degree programmes' (Circular W03/35HE) was issued in May 2003 and closed in September 2003. We received 151 responses – 126 from higher education institutions and 25 from other organisations and individuals.
2. We invited respondents to comment on the proposed table of eight standards:
  - institutional arrangements
  - research environment
  - the selection, admission, enrolment and induction of students
  - supervisory arrangements
  - initial review and subsequent progress
  - the development of research and other skills
  - feedback mechanisms
  - appeals and complaints.
3. We also asked respondents to answer five other questions about the project in general and the funding bodies' proposals for assessing the proposed standards.
4. Key issues arising from the consultation are noted below.
5. Responses showed clear and continuing support for the principle that institutions should adopt high standards of supervision and training in order to qualify for postgraduate research funding. Changes made to the proposed standards as a result of the earlier informal consultation were welcomed. There was strong support for elevating some of the points proposed as good practice to the status of threshold standards, including:
  - the need for institutions to monitor, review and act on the application of their code of practice on research degree programmes (RDPs)
  - adequate facilities for the research project (provided that the emphasis is on access rather than outright provision)
  - each examiner to provide an independent report on the thesis before the viva.
6. There was also support for strengthening the section on the development of research and other skills, whether by raising one or more of the good practice guidelines to the status of threshold standards, or by embedding the Research Councils' joint skills statement within this particular standard.
7. Respondents raised detailed concerns around three areas: the research environment; supervisory arrangements, and whether the funding bodies should pursue numerical thresholds for so-called critical mass.

8. In terms of research environment there was not support for the proposed target on submission rates, mainly due to problems outside the influence of institutions.

9. In responding to the standard which proposed a maximum number of students per supervisor, institutions commented that the maximum number depended both on discipline and on supervisors' other academic, managerial and administrative workload. For supervisors whose main duties were student supervision, a maximum of six students was too few; while for supervisors with a heavy portfolio of other work a threshold of six was too high.

10. Three-quarters of respondents commented on whether the funding bodies should pursue numerical thresholds for critical mass. Almost all of these urged the funding bodies not to pursue quantitative targets but to stick with a qualitative measure, as in section 2a 'Research environment' of the standards framework, which states that 'effective interactions between the student and a mix of active researchers and students' should be facilitated. This was for several reasons, including:

- a. The perceived absence of a causal link between the number of people involved and the quality of RDP provision.
- b. The different population sizes, requirements and academic processes of different disciplines.
- c. The potential negative impact on specialist and emerging disciplines.

11. A significant number of respondents made detailed comments on proposals to link assessment with Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) audit. Particular concern was expressed over the introduction of a separate set of standards when a QAA code on postgraduate research programmes was already in existence. There was broad support for the incorporation of the funding bodies' standards into the QAA code.