

To: Heads of higher education institutions in  
Wales

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## **POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES: MINIMUM STANDARDS AND FUNDING**

- 1 In May 2003, the four UK higher education funding bodies jointly consulted on the development of minimum standards for research degree programmes (RDPs) (Circular W03/35HE). The funding bodies subsequently announced in February 2004 that they were considering with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) the possibility of embedding these minimum standards within the revised section 1 of the QAA's Code of Practice, which was then in preparation (Circular W04/10HE). This was in response to concerns expressed during the consultation process about the introduction of a separate set of standards when the QAA Code already existed. The announcement also indicated that each of the funding bodies would consider individually how to make the link between the revised code and funding. I am now writing to let you know of subsequent developments.

### **Revised QAA Code of Practice**

- 2 The QAA published the revised section 1 of its Code of Practice on its website (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk>) on 30 September. It was drawn up by a working group which included representation from the higher education funding bodies, and its 27 precepts between them cover all of the key elements in the minimum standards previously proposed by the funding bodies.

### **Link to Funding**

- 3 HEFCW has operated a separate funding stream for PGR since 2000/01. It intends to review its current PGR funding method during 2004/05, in consultation with the sector, with a view to implementing a revised method from 2006/07.
- 4 The Council will continue to expect all HEIs to ensure that their PGR programmes are provided in line with the revised QAA code.

## **Monitoring Arrangements**

- 5 The Council intends to discuss with the QAA and the sector any changes which may be required to the QAA's existing arrangements for institutional review following the introduction of the revised section 1 of the Code of Practice which, as noted above, incorporates the funding bodies' minimum standards. This approach should bring substantial benefits in supporting continued improvement in RDP provision while minimising the associated accountability burden. In discussions with the sector on this matter, the Council will have regard to any new procedures which may be introduced elsewhere in the UK in response to the revised Code.
- 6 In the meantime, the Council has commissioned the QAA to undertake a special, one-off review of HEIs' alignment with the revised section of the Code during the 2005/06 academic year. The possibility of such a one-off review was signalled in Circular W03/35HE, and similar reviews are being commissioned in England and Northern Ireland.

## **Special Review**

- 7 The main purposes of the special review will be:
  - to ensure that HEIs have in place, and apply, comprehensive criteria for the quality and standards of RDPs, and that these are embedded in internal quality assurance systems and processes
  - to facilitate a self-assessment of the "goodness of fit" between current institutional practice and the revised QAA Code of Practice
  - to provide the Council with an assured basis for the provision of PGR funding through its revised funding method.
- 8 The special review will be based primarily on written information provided by HEIs in response to a questionnaire. Questionnaire responses will be supported by the submission of appropriate institutional documentation and by review visits to a limited sample of institutions.
- 9 In any cases where serious concerns are identified, the institution concerned may be subject to a further review, following an opportunity to address the issues identified.
- 10 The QAA will consult institutions during 2004/05 on the format and content of the written submissions. In the meantime, an outline specification for the special review in Wales is attached for information at Annex A.

Yours sincerely

**PROFESSOR PHILIP GUMMETT**  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**SPECIAL REVIEW OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES**

**COMMISSIONED FROM THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY (QAA)  
BY THE HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR WALES (HEFCW)**

**INTRODUCTION**

- 1 In 2002/03, the four UK higher education funding bodies jointly consulted the HE sector on the development of minimum standards and an underlying framework of good practice for research degree programmes (RDPs) (Circulars W03/01HE and W03/35HE). The proposed standards were based on existing good practice across the HE sector, and covered a range of topics relating to the content, organisation and management of RDPs, together with skills training requirements for research students.
- 2 Responses to the consultation indicated clear support for the principle that institutions should adopt high standards of supervision and training in order to qualify for postgraduate research funding. There was also general agreement that any assessment arrangements should make maximum use of existing mechanisms, with one possibility being that such assessment might be incorporated into the institutional reviews undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). However, concerns were expressed about the proposed introduction of a separate set of standards on RDPs in addition to the existing QAA Code of Practice in this area.
- 3 The funding bodies indicated in February 2004 that they were discussing with the QAA the possibility of embedding their minimum standards for RDPs in the QAA Code of Practice (Circular W04/10HE). Following consultation with HEIs, the QAA has produced a revised Code of Practice on RDPs, incorporating the minimum standards, which was published in September 2004.
- 4 HEFCW intends to discuss with the QAA and with the sector any changes which may be required to the QAA's existing arrangements for institutional review following the introduction of the revised section 1 of the Code of Practice. In the meantime, however, HEFCW has commissioned the QAA to undertake a special review of RDP provision in 2005/06. The possibility of such a review was signalled in Circular W03/35HE.

**PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW**

- 5 The purpose of the special review will be:
  - to ensure that HEIs have in place, and apply, comprehensive criteria for the quality and standards of research degree provision, and that these are embedded in internal quality assurance systems and processes
  - to define expectations and service standards for research training and supervision

- to facilitate a self-assessment of the “goodness of fit” between current institutional practice and the revised QAA Code of Practice, incorporating the funding bodies’ minimum standards.
- to supplement existing information from institutional review and previous continuation audit reports on the management and support for research degree activity
- to provide the Council with an assured basis for the provision of PGR funding.

## **SCOPE OF THE REVIEW**

- 6 The scope of the special review is likely to include the following:
- Implementation of revised Code of Practice on research degree programmes, incorporating the funding bodies’ minimum standards
  - RDP strategies and other related institutional documents (e.g quality manuals)
  - Arrangements for annual reporting and monitoring of RDPs
  - Statistical evidence of RDP outputs – completion rates, awards, withdrawals
  - Information on student progression (including transition from MPhil to PhD)
  - The research environment
  - Evidence of student feedback and follow-up actions
  - Arrangements for appeals and complaints.

## **COVERAGE**

- 7 The special review will apply to all HEIs offering research degree programmes in Wales.

## **METHODOLOGY**

- 8 The review will be based primarily on written information provided by HEIs. A process of information gathering will be developed based on a set of key review questions, presented in the form of a questionnaire. This questionnaire will enquire about institutions’ approach to the management and support of RDP activity.
- 9 Responses to the questionnaire will be supported by the submission of appropriate institutional documentation, relating to the kinds of areas outlined in para 6 above. It is envisaged that, wherever possible, this supporting

documentation will consist of copies of existing institutional material (e.g. quality manuals, appeals procedures etc), rather than material produced specially for the review.

- 10 Institutions' submissions will be evaluated by a process of peer review, which will be conducted by a selected group of reviewers with extensive experience of the development and management of RDP activity in higher education. Normally, a panel of three reviewers will assess each submission. Reviewers will provide a judgement on each submission, based on review criteria which will be developed in due course.
- 11 Review visits to a limited sample of institutions will be undertaken to follow up on the written submissions and allow for meetings with staff and students. The sample of institutions to be visited will be selected on the basis of the outcomes of the assessment of the written submissions, and the need to consider current practice across a representative range of different types of institution.
- 12 At the end of the review process, brief individual reports identifying outcomes and any issues for further consideration will be provided for each HEI, and made available to HEFCW. An overview report, covering the exercise as a whole, will also be produced.
- 13 In any cases where serious concerns are identified, the institution concerned may be subject to a further review, following an opportunity to address the issues identified.
- 14 The management of the process – including briefing of institutions, the distribution of questionnaires and the processing of responses – will be handled by QAA Assistant Directors with support, where appropriate, from the Information Unit.

## **TIMESCALE**

- 15 The review will take place in the 2005/06 academic year.
- 16 During 2004/05, the QAA will consult institutions on the format and content of the written submissions.
- 17 The outline timetable for the exercise is as follows:

Early 2005	Consultation with HE sector
August – December 2005	Distribution of guidance for HEIs Selection and training of reviewers Briefing for HEIs
January – May 2006	Distribution of review questions Receipt of responses Evaluation by review teams Selection of sample reviews Conduct of reviews
June – July 2006	Production of reports Production of overview report