

## **A Summary of: Aberystwyth University & Bangor University - Joint Strategies for Learning and Teaching & Widening Access 2011/12 to 2013/14**

### **1. Summary**

The Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Widening Access Strategy translate the Universities' overarching Strategic Plans into actions, and define targets by which strategic objectives can be measured.

The overarching aims of the Strategies in this document are to:

- Create an integrated plan to enhance access, participation and students' experience of learning and teaching at the Institutions.
- Identify and disseminate effective practices across the Institutions and across their Schools/Academic Departments.
- Ensure that the Institutions' activities are informed by effective practices in the UK and elsewhere.

The Universities' detailed three year strategies for Learning and Teaching and for Widening Access represent a translation of strategic aims into initiatives and enhancement projects. The aims of the strategies are informed by the Universities' goals, the priorities outlined by the Welsh Government and by HEFCW, and also by current developments and priorities in the UK HE sector. The strategies also include those priorities emerging from the Higher Education Academy's engagement with Welsh HEIs through the Welsh Institutional Group (WIG) - namely Students as Partners, Learning in Employment and Learning for Employment.

The Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Widening Access Strategy have been informed by the Institutions' Fee Plans and the targets in the strategies are designed to complement the targets identified in the Fee Plans

This document covers both Learning and Teaching and Widening Access. The strategies are presented together to demonstrate the integration of these areas and to achieve an increasingly holistic approach within and across the Institutions.

### **2. Institutional Mission and Planning**

#### **2.1. Strategic Alliance and Regionalisation**

Aberystwyth University and Bangor University have formed a Strategic Alliance based on the close working relationship developed over a number of years. This is particularly through the HEFCW supported 'Research & Enterprise Partnership', established in 2006 in order to promote collaboration in achieving internationally competitive research, and the 10 year collaboration between Aberystwyth and Bangor (and 3 other Welsh HEIs) on the postgraduate certificate for teaching in higher education (PGCertTHE), mandatory for all academic staff new to teaching at both Institutions. The Alliance has developed further and now encompasses other activities such as the joint 'Aber-Bangor Skills Centre' and the 'North & Mid-Wales Centre for Teacher Education'. The Alliance also facilitated the creation of the merged 'North & Mid-Wales Reaching Wider Partnership'. In this co-operative context, the two Universities agreed to pioneer the development of joint Learning and Teaching and Widening Access Strategies.

The Alliance aims to develop a close working partnership between the two Institutions which will enable them to operate more effectively and efficiently than they could as entirely separate Institutions, and will support their drive to be internationally excellent in specified areas of activity. Both universities will seek to ensure that the Alliance's activities lead to an enhancement of the quality of current provision, to support for the maintenance of activities which might otherwise not be permanently available, or to facilitate new initiatives which individually the universities would not be able to afford, or to a combination of these.

Specifically the Alliance aims to implement:

- Common oversight of the implementation and monitoring of the strategies.
- Common enhancement projects and themes.
- Common and Institution specific targets.

The process of developing the joint strategies has already led to greater understanding by each university of the other's practices and strengths. Over the course of the three years in which the joint strategy will run, that mutual understanding will be deepened and the Institutions will converge and enhance their practices.

The two Universities have also worked closely with other partners to create CADARN, the Regional Strategy for North and Mid-Wales. This regional partnership embodies a ten-year vision to be the 'learning region of, and for, Wales', and to be distinctive within and beyond Wales.

## **2.2. Strategic Plans and Mission Statements**

Both Universities have maintained a strong commitment to the delivery of high quality student experience for many decades. Built on the pillars of linking research and teaching, personalised pastoral care, and variety and experimentation in learning and teaching, the Universities' provision has been continuously enhanced. The evidence for this is contained in successive positive Institutional Review reports from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the successful applications of the Universities for research and teaching degree awarding powers, high scoring in the National Student Satisfaction survey, and not least their reputation for sector-leading Welsh medium provision.

### **A) Aberystwyth University**

Learning and Teaching is central to Aberystwyth's Strategic Plan and its mission to continue to be an internationally competitive teaching and research University which addresses global challenges and is responsive to the needs of the local community, of Wales and of the wider world.

To deliver this mission Aberystwyth University aims to:

- Provide students with learning opportunities of the highest quality and offer a distinctive environment for study.
- Respond to the changing needs of society for skilled, educated and employable graduates.
- Produce high quality research which is internationally acknowledged, responding to intellectual, cultural, social and economic needs.
- Work in partnership to serve the community, the UK, Europe and the wider world.
- Play a full part in the social, cultural and economic development of Wales, including support for the Welsh language.

### **B) Bangor University**

Learning and Teaching are key elements of the University's Strategic Plan with its mission to be a leading research-led University with an international reputation for teaching and research, that fosters the intellectual and personal development of its students and staff, provides a supportive multicultural environment, promotes widening access and inclusiveness, and supports the economic, social and cultural well-being of Wales and the wider community it serves. Bangor University's aim is to be recognised regionally, nationally and internationally as a centre of excellence for a varied portfolio of academic programmes and for the high quality of the experience it provides for its students.

The University's Strategic Plan includes the following priorities:

- Access to excellent teaching and learning.

- Delivery of high quality student experience.
- Playing a leading role in Welsh language and culture.
- Partnerships with Institutions in Wales to deliver *For our Future*.

### **2.3. Management and Oversight**

A Strategic Planning Board has been established to provide overarching management of the Strategic Alliance; this provides a strategic focus for collaboration and joint initiatives. At both Institutions, the Learning and Teaching and Widening Access Strategies are the responsibility of the University Executive, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and reporting to the Council. The Learning and Teaching and Widening Access Strategies have been developed under the leadership of the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor at each University, drawing on the broad principles enshrined in the previous strategies, and on internal consultation with staff and student representatives. A small task group of staff from the two Universities has met regularly to coordinate the development of the joint strategies. A similar group will continue to meet to oversee the implementation and monitoring of the strategies and will report to the Strategic Planning Board. The group will:

- Plan the implementation of projects/actions.
- Monitor progress on the completion of targets.
- Monitor key quantitative information for L&T and Widening Access.
- Review aims and objectives and opportunities for collaborative projects/actions.

### **2.4. Responses to the Capping of Student Numbers**

Both Universities responded to the HEFCW consultation on the Management of Full-time undergraduate numbers from 2011/12, regarding the need to reduce pressures on the Welsh Government's Student Finance Fund. With applications buoyant at both Universities, each has reviewed the admissions protocols to be used in the 2010-11 admissions cycle and confirmation period within the context of the University's strategy and with particular attention to:

- Meeting the targets for registration in September 2011 (i.e. to be within plus 2% of the Institutional target).
- Raising entry requirements, particularly for those Departments and Schools which evidenced strong recruitment in 2010.
- Managing the transition from a largely 'recruiting' to a 'selective' university to reflect 'capping' and the increased demand for places.
- Regular monitoring of the numbers of applications and offers made to ensure timely intervention can be made where models suggest a medium or higher risk of over-recruitment.
- Reviewing admissions procedures for applicants from widening access 'target groups'.

## **3. The role of students in the strategies**

Both Institutions have adopted inclusive policies and practices with regard to student participation and representation. Students, including Welsh Medium students, are represented, through the Guild of Students/Students Union, on all major Task Groups and Committees involved with learning, teaching, student support, widening access and the wider student experience. Student representation is also facilitated by staff-student committees in Schools/Departments. Students' views at module and programme level are regularly elicited, and responses to these student evaluations, are monitored through annual module and programme development plans. Within the context of the current Strategy, student representation and experience have been identified as projects in their own right but they also underpin the Strategy as a whole, with the National Student Survey and internal survey indicators of student satisfaction being important and measurable targets.

#### **4. Learning and Teaching Strategy 2011/12 to 2013/14**

##### **4.1. Aims of the Learning and Teaching Strategy**

The overarching aims of the Learning and Teaching Strategy are to:

- Create an integrated plan to enhance learning and teaching at the Institutions.
- Identify and disseminate effective practice across Schools/Departments.
- Ensure that learning and teaching is informed by effective practice in the UK and elsewhere.

The Learning and Teaching Strategy achieves this by defining Quality Enhancement Projects each with its own clearly defined targets. Emphasis has been placed on ensuring that the targets are specific and measurable, either in qualitative or quantitative terms. The Quality Enhancement Projects address key themes that are of importance to the Institutions and that align with WG and HEFCW priorities. Quality Enhancement Projects also provide a mechanism to co-ordinate actions and to deliver targets.

##### **4.2. Previous Learning and Teaching Strategy**

Each University has evaluated its previous strategy with the aim of building and further developing successful approaches to the enhancement of learning and teaching. The decision to produce a joint strategy for 2011/12 to 2013/14 allows each University to reflect on areas where the other has made greater progress and where it can benefit from the other's experience. Both previous strategies were informed by HEFCW guidance and Welsh Government priorities, and there was significant overlap between them, but there were also differences of emphasis and direction. Priorities were addressed through projects and programmes that were subject to monitoring and reported in annual reports to HEFCW.

The current Strategy builds on the achievements of the 2007/08-2010/11 Strategy, and includes elements that are a progression from the themes of that Strategy. However, the current Strategy has also been influenced by student satisfaction surveys and the priorities identified in several strategic documents.

Critical self-assessment suggests that the previous Strategy was based on too many disparate themes with qualitative targets. Particular emphasis has now been placed on a strategy focused by Quality Enhancement Projects, each with clearly defined aims, objectives and targets.

##### **4.3. Enhancement Projects:**

Defined by the QAA as *"the process of taking deliberate steps at Institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities"*, Quality Enhancement Projects (QEP's) facilitate the process of making quality enhancement a structurally embedded aim, process and product within the teaching and learning cycle. That is, rather than enhancement being more sporadic and spontaneous, it becomes an integral part of the overarching teaching and learning strategy, the annual cycle of planning and provision, and an expectation among staff in the practice of teaching and learning.

The role of students as initiators, consultants, evaluators and Project members is essential. Thus ideas for Projects can be 'bottom-up' or 'top-down'.

Each QEP will normally be championed and led by a Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching & Learning) or another senior member of staff. It is expected that QEP's will run from 2 to 4 years with a small Task and End Group that has expertise in the topic and enthusiasm for transformational change. Each QEP will report progress to the appropriate monitoring body

within their own Institution, but also to other Task Groups or committees where appropriate. The outcomes and impacts of each QEP will also be monitored by the joint group.

The QEP associated with the Learning & Teaching Strategy for 2011/12 - 2013/14, which have been agreed by the two Institutions as part of the process of developing the joint Strategy, are described in brief below:

**i) Assessment and Feedback:** Assessment and feedback are important because of the comparatively low scores across the sector for 'feedback' in the NSS and more general concerns about assessment and feedback. It is recognised that improving the practices of staff and the perceptions and experiences of students will take time and require the involvement of different groups. Addressing the issues through a Quality Enhancement Project will allow a co-ordinated approach, drawing on the expertise of both Institutions and their academic schools/departments, IT services, staff development units (particularly through PGCertTHE courses), students and others as appropriate.

Particular elements will include:

- e-assessment
- Electronic submission of coursework.
- Audio feedback.
- Questionmark Perception
- Building in opportunities for formative feedback within modules.

**ii) Graduate Attributes:** The aim is that graduates have the knowledge, skills and insight to enable them to increase their chances of gaining and succeeding in employment, and to ensure employees have fair and equitable access to learning opportunities to develop skills in the workplace, with benefits for themselves, the workforce, communities and the Welsh economy.

Particular elements will include:

- Bangor Employability Award
- Aberystwyth Higher Education Achievement Report, HEAR

**iii) Welsh Medium Curriculum:** Build on the Universities' strong portfolio of Welsh medium courses and modules by developing this provision, in collaboration with Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol.

Particular elements will include:

- Links to Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol.
- Links to progression and widening access.
- Joint provision and developments including collaborative projects.

**iv) Curriculum design and reform of Postgraduate Taught Programmes:** There is a desire to assess the Universities' PGT portfolio in order to enable them to respond to the changing higher education environment, including changes to the tuition fee regimes, and to create the long term ability to compete in the global market. A key driver is the provision of distinctive programmes that are underpinned by research and/or professional practice, with the ultimate goal of providing students with the opportunity to gain both discipline specific knowledge and the employability skills required to succeed in the work place.

The overarching aim is to ensure a coherent and efficient approach to achieving targeted growth of postgraduate taught provision spanning schools/departments.

Particular elements will include:

- Create a cultural shift where PGT provision is seen as a more fundamental and distinct part of the Universities' core business.
- Develop further specific marketing approaches for the postgraduate portfolio.
- Develop further the Universities' international recruitment, including consideration of collaborative and distance provision.
- Develop further the Universities' Welsh medium recruitment, including part-time provision.
- Secure a reputation for nurturing a high quality experience for PGT students.
- Continue to seek out EU funding to enable widening access students to access postgraduate study opportunities.

**v) Technology Enhanced Learning:** Maintain impetus in the dissemination of good practice and encourage innovative use of technology to enhance learning and teaching, taking account of the HEFCW's review of the implementation of Enhancing Learning Through Technology strategies in Wales. The GWELLA projects at each Institution introduced significant enhancements which will continue to be a key part of the learning and teaching environment at both Institutions. Technology enhanced learning is a major contributor to providing an accessible curriculum to a range of widening access students and therefore has a key role in promoting inclusivity. Staff will continue to be able to bid for funding for technology led projects.

Particular elements will include:

- Pedagogically effective use of lecture capture.
- Blended Learning.
- Mobile delivery of learning.
- Learning styles.
- Assessment tools.
- Formative feedback.
- Media-rich teaching, where appropriate.

**vi) Internationalisation of the Curriculum:** The aims are: 1) to review existing provision to establish its relevance for international students and identify new programmes that would fit with the Institutions' strategic directions and relate to changes in the market and recruitment trends and; 2) to review the relevance of programmes for UK students with regard to international employability, inter-cultural awareness and international perspectives.

Particular elements will include:

- Internationalisation of curriculum.
- Study abroad placements including Widening Access students.
- Promoting Modern Language training for UK students.
- Integration of International students.
- ESDGC

**vii) Student Representation and Experience:** Ensure that the University has open channels for communication with students with representation at course, School/Department/Faculty and central level. To ensure that student feedback on the learning experience is incorporated in the routine evaluation, planning and responsive development of academic provision. The course representative system will continue to be strengthened and embedded throughout the Universities.

Particular elements will include:

- Considering a joint appointment of a 'Representation and Experience Coordinator' based on Aberystwyth's experience.

- Engagement with Higher Education Academy's 'development themes' - namely Students as Partners, Learning in Employment and Learning for Employment (linked to work on Graduate Attributes).

**viii) Recognising and Rewarding Teaching Excellence:** Build on the existing Teaching Excellence/Fellowship and CPD schemes and link these to HEA accreditation and the National Teaching Fellowships.

Particular elements will include:

- Encourage a holistic CPD Framework that engages with progression routes through the relevant UK standards for all academic and academic related roles.
- Working towards CPD Framework Accreditation with the Higher Education Academy.

#### 4.4. Themes

The themes that underpin the Learning & Teaching Strategy are grouped under 3 headings, widening access, student experience and skills. These are 3 of the 5 key themes identified in HEFCW's Corporate Strategy 2010/11 – 2012/13. The other themes are knowledge transfer and research.

##### A) Widening Access

**i) Inclusivity and equality:** The Universities aim to attract, without barriers, the widest spectrum of students. It is important to embed the Universities' policies and ensure consistency of implementation.

**ii) Widening participation:** Ensure that the Universities cater for students from all backgrounds, with particular emphasis on Communities First areas.

**iii) Recognition of prior learning and experience:** Ensure that prior learning and experience are appropriately recognised and accepted as an entry criterion and/or are rewarded by University credits.

**iv) Collaboration between HE and FE (inc. Foundation Degrees and Progression):** Ensure that links with FE permit the development of collaborative and validated programmes, particularly focused on Foundation Degrees and progression from FE to HE.

**v) Curriculum design (inc. Programme and subject reviews):** Ensure that the suite of programmes is inclusive and fit for purpose and contemporary, both in terms of its link to graduate careers and employer engagement

**vi) Flexibility of learning:** Ensure that the University's programmes permit flexible learning opportunities, facilitating distance learning, part-time learning and short-time completion, adult community learning and accrediting small amounts of learning.

**vii) Regional/local provision:** Ensure that the University's programmes cater for regional and local needs, particularly in relation to the graduate attributes required by local employers.

**viii) Retention:** Ensure that students are encouraged and supported so that they are offered every opportunity to successfully complete their chosen programmes.

##### B) Student Experience

**i) Degree classification and achievement:** Maintain an ongoing scrutiny of student achievement to ensure that the Universities' standards are comparable to National standards and informed by recent debate.

**ii) Individualisation of the curriculum:** Ensure a degree of individualisation of the curriculum through personal contact in seminars, tutorials, laboratory classes, fieldwork, problem-solving activities and placements, and where appropriate with support from Learner Support Services. Students have different learning styles and learning needs, and that different lecturers within the same programme teach and assess in varied ways. Thus variety of approach to the curriculum is foundational to our principles and practices, combining pedagogic diversity with awareness that students are individual learners and not just a class.

**iii) Research Informed Teaching:** Ensure that students experience learning through, and about, research and inquiry. Students should be exposed to research, in a way informed by pedagogical scholarship; that will educate them in investigative skills that prepare them for their future; and give them the opportunity to engage in research themselves.

**iv) Student participation in quality assurance and quality enhancement:** Continue to develop the role of students in QA procedures including internal audits. Ensure that student feedback on courses and modules is properly addressed in annual monitoring processes.

**v) Increasing Student Satisfaction in Learning and Teaching (inc. NSS):** Central monitoring of NSS results with on-going dialogue with schools to respond to weaknesses and build on strengths. In the NSS, overall satisfaction with teaching and learning at both Universities is high. However, levels of satisfaction vary and hence current efforts are directed towards improving satisfaction in those schools and aspects of the survey in which levels of satisfaction are low.

**vi) Provision of Public Information (inc. course information & costs of studying):** Ensure that University had defined and robust systems to make sure that information about courses and costs of studying are comprehensive and accurate.

#### C) Skills

**i) Acquisition of skills:** Ensure that students, particularly in the first year, are equipped with skills for HE study and that on-going skills development reflects discipline and employer requirements. To support all students in the transition to HE from previous educational settings, develop resources and training for the acquisition of the skills for independent learning at degree level, both centrally and through academic Schools/Departments.

**ii) Work-based learning:** Ensure that the University offers opportunities, through flexible provision, for learning whilst in employment and for future employment.

**iii) Education for sustainable development and global citizenship:** Ensure that the University's programmes address the need for students to engage with the globally important issues surrounding sustainability and citizenship; but also with an appreciation of how these principles can be applied in regional and local settings.

#### **4.5. Links between Enhancement Projects and Themes**

The Enhancement Projects provide a focus for activities and a means by which the themes will be addressed. This approach ensures that the themes and Enhancement projects are interwoven, so that the themes are pursued in the context of a strategic and holistic approach, rather than as individual and unrelated strands.

### **6. Widening Access Strategy 2011/12 to 2013/14**

The Welsh Government's 'For Our Future: the 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales' (November 2009) indicated that Welsh Universities should "*help narrow the gap in opportunities which might otherwise exist to differences in wealth, geography or*



*background'* (p.1). Based on the two pillars of social justice and supporting a buoyant economy, universities are asked to reconsider their current policies such as part-time study, systematic progression pathways from post-16 learning, closer links with the workplace, collaborative regional partnerships in particular with Further Education as part of the Transformation Agenda, greater use of accreditation of prior learning, Foundation Degrees, more work-based learning, community regeneration and workforce development. In particular, paragraph 44 (p.12) indicates that: *"we expect to see a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to tackling the challenge of low participation"*; while paragraph 54 (p.15) indicates that WG will renew their approach to widening access to higher education by ensuring a *"continued and concerted approach to supporting those who face the highest barriers to discovering unlocking their potential. ... we expect a renewed widening access strategy in 2010 to include stronger focus on helping those who access higher education to successfully complete their learning objectives"*.

In the HEFCW 'Corporate Strategy 2010/11 – 2012/13', one of the five key themes is Widening Access, with ensuring *"equity, opportunity and success in higher education"* highlighted. The strategy includes encouraging *"higher education providers to improve the evidence base, including data collection, to inform their strategies and to demonstrate impact and success. There will be a particular emphasis on part-time (including innovative approaches to flexible and work-based) provision, fair access, including access to the professions, and retention - with an emphasis on helping students to complete their learning objectives successfully"* (p.9). One outcome of the Widening Access strategy is seen by HEFCW as raising the number of HE Welsh domiciled students in Communities First Areas by 10%. A second outcome is defined as a 2.7% rise in module completion rates in Welsh HE.

## **6.1. Mission and Purpose**

Widening Access to higher education at Aberystwyth and Bangor is fundamental to the Universities' aims and forms part of their mission statements (see page 2). Widening Access can contribute to developing a buoyant economy and to the health of a sustainable Wales by ensuring social justice for potential and existing students.

## **6.2. Strategic Aims and Objectives**

The Widening Access strategy for 2011/12 to 2013/14 is based on the following aims. These aims are then translated into actions with associated impact measures and targets. The overarching Widening Access aims are:

- To raise aspirations and to improve attainment, in order to support Fair Admissions to Higher Education.
- To maximise the effectiveness of transition and induction, and maximise retention and student success.
- Widening access to higher level skills and employability.
- Integrating with the Universities equality and diversity agenda.
- Fostering excellent collaboration and partnerships.
- To support the Widening Access Strategy agenda of Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and progression to Welsh medium HE programmes and modules.
- To articulate with the skills needs of employers in the region and aid workforce development in close collaboration with Reaching Wider.

Aberystwyth and Bangor share a common vision, developed in both Institutions' mission statements and strategic plans. That vision is for inclusive participation as a vital component of both social justice and economic buoyancy. The Universities will provide the process and context for successful entry and participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it, with particular attention to those for whom such participation in previous decades would have been unlikely or even impossible. This will be facilitated by community and school liaison outreach and in-reach activities, targeted widening access outreach and in-reach

activities, admissions policies, induction events, curriculum design, teaching and learning, pastoral care and actions to ensure retention and attainment.

Thus the drive and ambition in our Widening Access strategy is inspired by a belief that there continues to be unjust discrepancies in the regional take-up of higher education opportunities between different social and protected groups (e.g. socio-economic class, age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, race, religion, sexual orientation). The under-representation from particular groups in Wales relates to social issues of equity, access, employment and social inclusion, and takes account of the Welsh Child Poverty Strategy, 2010, which states that "*Addressing poverty and inequality among children and young people is crucial to giving them the opportunity to make the most of their lives.*"

In particular, we are aware of the specific groups mentioned in the Welsh Government Sponsored Bodies (WGSBs) recent work (July 2011) towards the drafting of the 2012 Child Poverty Strategy.

### **6.3. The Management of Widening Access**

The HEA review of Widening Access Strategies highlighted the importance of a whole institution approach with recommendations that included:

- Senior management leadership to promote cultural change.
- Working with staff to integrate widening access and equality.
- Collecting and monitoring widening access data to inform planning and development.
- Using data to evaluate impact.
- Providing sustained opportunities for listening to the student voice.

At Aberystwyth, the Widening Participation Committee is Chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching and the Student Experience) who also Chaired the Mid- and West-Wales Reaching Wider Partnership, leading to alignment and avoidance of duplication. This Committee has good cross Institutional involvements from all levels reports directly to the Senate of the University and oversees the strategic development of the Institution's widening participation and social inclusion policies, in particular the Institution's Widening Access Strategy. It monitors performance and disseminates best practice. The Committee has good cross-Institutional involvement at the highest levels.

At Bangor, there is a strong senior manager responsibility and leadership for Widening Access. The ultimate ownership of Widening Access strategy lies with the University's Executive (chaired by the Vice-Chancellor) which defines, helps to develop and agrees major strategic and financial decisions. The University's Widening Access Executive Group implements, monitors and manages widening access activity. This Executive Group reports to the Teaching and Learning Task Group, which enables integration of the strategy into the larger teaching and learning strategy, is consulted on key strategic decisions, and helps communicate Widening Access strategies to all Schools and Colleges. The link between these three groups is the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) whose remit includes Widening Participation.