



Note of PSRB forum

18 February 2009

Association of Commonwealth Universities, London

In June 2008, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) held a meeting for representatives of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), which was attended by 30 representatives from around 20 professional bodies. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss areas of mutual interest and whether there was any attraction in holding further meetings or in carrying out other types of joint activity. It was suggested that QAA and the UK Inter-Professional Group (UKIPG) should work together to offer a series of events over the next year.

A number of topics were put forward for further discussion, as a result of which an event was held on 18 February 2009. The event focused on sharing practice in the reporting of review/accreditation activity.

At the event, the scene was set with presentations by Kirsty White, Head of Education Quality Assurance at the General Medical Council, and Elaine Harries Jenkins, Assistant Director at QAA. The presentations were followed by breakout group discussions, designed to share practice and experiences in reporting. The sessions covered the purpose of reports, their production, distribution and status.

The meeting also included a presentation and discussion on QAA's Causes for Concern procedure by QAA's Chief Executive, Peter Williams and Alan Bradshaw, Assistant Director. Finally, there were discussions led by Jane Hern, Chairman of UKIPG, to identify topics for future meetings.

1 Summary of breakout group discussions

1.1 Participants discussed their different approaches to producing reports and the challenge of catering to the needs of different audiences. In particular it was noted that the public are interested in much less detailed and less technical reports than other stakeholders. It was also noted that a significant number of professional bodies do not publish their reports for various reasons, while some bodies publish just their decisions or which programmes are authorised. In some cases the institution receives separate feedback, in addition to a published report. It was

apparent that a number of professional bodies are moving to shorter reports in order to address public expectations around both fitness to practise at a minimum level, and public accountability.

1.2 Not all accreditation exercises require visits. A number of participants described processes that are entirely, or usually, desk-based, while other processes only require review visits for initial recognition and/or major changes to programmes. It appeared that a number of professional bodies are considering these types of accreditation processes, in a move to a more risk-based assessment model.

1.3 The reporting and promotion of good practice was reported to take place in many ways. In some cases, professional bodies do not make judgements on good practice because it is considered inappropriate when the purpose of the review is to validate programmes to a minimum level. Other participants described a number of different mechanisms for reporting back good practice to the sector, for example the publication of annual good practice reports (where good practice is not identified in individual accreditation reports), the sharing of annual summaries, and the publication of case studies in a newsletter. In some cases these summaries are not just confined to good practice but cover problem areas too.

1.4 In addition to the involvement of academics and professionals/practitioners in the review process, participants also discussed the involvement of other types of stakeholders, in particular students, service users and lay people in the review process. For some professional bodies the move to include student members on review panels is being driven by European developments. Student engagement more generally was recognised as an important component of the review process, although a number of challenges were identified around, for example, representativeness, how much weight should be given to students' opinions, and the short period during which students can make a meaningful contribution before they move on to their careers.

1.5 A number of professional bodies involve lay members, either as reviewers or on their committees. While this was considered very beneficial, it could be difficult for these members truly to represent the public interest. This is particularly an issue in the health area, where it was felt that people could be motivated to join in order to further their own personal agendas.

1.6 Participants discussed the authoring of reports. Some teams include a member of staff who writes the report and might also act as secretary, while for other professional bodies it is the panel members, including lay members, who undertake the report writing.

1.7 Many participants reported that they had mechanisms for following up accreditation visits. In some cases there is regular annual monitoring, while for others the arrangements depend on the outcome of the review and could involve processes such as interim reporting and action plans.

2 Topics for future meetings

2.1 A number of areas were put forward in the plenary session as potential topics for future meetings:

- it was noted that there were both considerable differences and similarities in the approaches taken by professional bodies in monitoring provision between accreditation reviews, and it was suggested that this would be a useful follow on to the day's discussions on reporting

- the training of reviewers
- a number of aspects of international accreditation and recognition work were raised, including the sharing of intelligence, national quality assurance arrangements, accreditation agreements and issues around the equivalence/recognition of qualifications. It was suggested that it would be helpful to undertake a mapping exercise of overseas accreditation activity among professional bodies.

Further information on the points raised is available from David Gale at d.gale@qaa.ac.uk