



Report of the fifth Annual Liaison Conference - Employer-responsive provision 10 July 2009, Woburn House, London

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) held its fifth Annual Liaison Conference on Friday 10 July 2009 at Woburn House, London. This was a combined event for both the institutional liaison scheme and a similar scheme dedicated to liaison with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Subject Centres. The conference was intended as an opportunity for representatives of institutions and Subject Centres participating in the liaison schemes to meet with QAA to discuss employer-responsive provision, which is a growing area of activity for some institutions.

The term 'employer-responsive provision' was adopted for these discussions in order to focus on provision that is designed and delivered to respond directly to the needs of employers, and which often requires flexible validation, delivery and assessment. It can also include the workplace as the site of learning. Such provision may take the form of a whole programme or a range of bite-sized units that may or may not aggregate into an academic award. This can be distinguished from other, more traditional forms of work-based learning, for example full-time programmes of study that include periods of placement and/or employability skills embedded in the curriculum.

In order to support discussions on this topic, QAA conducted a project to have a greater understanding of institutions' involvement with employer-responsive provision, and to establish the extent to which it operates differently across different subject areas. 57 higher education institutions and 11 HEA Subject Centres participated in the first phase of the project, completing a survey to explore how much employer-responsive provision there is, and how different institutions interpret it. The aim of the survey was to help inform QAA as to what additional support, information and guidance is recommended by higher education institutions to ensure that both internal and external quality assurance arrangements are appropriate and effective for work-based learning and employer-responsive provision. The results of the survey formed a major part of the event as the overall findings were presented to delegates. A range of common features was drawn from the findings and discussed in the afternoon session.

The conference opened with a brief introduction and welcome from Peter Williams, Chief Executive, QAA, who spoke about the need for employer-responsive provision to be subject to the same rigour, in terms of quality assurance, as traditional provision. He also updated delegates on related work being undertaken by the QAA/Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE) joint task group, which reported on the quality assurance approaches and needs of provision that is led and funded by employers.

Wendy Stubbs, Assistant Director, QAA, highlighted in her presentation the growing importance of this type of provision to higher education and outlined previous QAA involvement in this area, including the joint research conducted with HEFCE in 2007/8 and QAA's 2008 statement on the quality assurance of employer engagement and workforce development (available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/employers/QAAsstatement.asp).

Mandy Nelson, Head of the Information Unit, QAA, presented the findings of the survey work carried out by QAA officers in institutions. The survey identified that employer-responsive provision is a growing area, but that a single definition is not shared across institutions. 54 per cent of the responding institutions reported that they had adopted strategies to facilitate the quality assurance of employer-responsive provision, with many of them putting new structures in place. 40 per cent of responding institutions had also adopted new processes. The survey also showed that 47 per cent of responding institutions were firm in the view that the quality assurance arrangements should not be different to those applied to traditional higher education programmes. The presentation also provided an insight into the range of matters in this area to which institutions gave consideration including: curriculum design, delivery and assessment; the use of external reference points; and the sustainability and risk management considerations of such provision.

Richard Brown, Development Officer, QAA, presented the findings from the liaison discussions conducted with the HEA Subject Centres (three humanities subjects, three health-related subjects and five 'applied' subject areas). He noted that subject involvement with employer-responsive provision differed widely, as did the approach taken. Some of the themes emerging from these discussions include the need for quality frameworks to be flexible, the need for assessment to be properly managed, and the need to ensure that learning conducted and assessed in the workplace can be properly scrutinised by external examiners

Following the QAA presentations there were three case studies demonstrating different approaches to responding to the needs of employers.

David Bonner and Frank Haddleton from Hertfordshire University presented their institution's flexible credit framework. The flexibility of this credit framework allows the university to be responsive to the needs of employers. It is centred around the development of a range of pre-validated 'short course descriptors' that can be customised to meet the needs of employers and an appropriate amount of credit attached to each short course.

Deborah Seddon of the Engineering Council UK demonstrated a DIUS-funded Gateway to the Professions project, which was a work-based route to Chartered and Incorporated Engineer status using the ECUK Specification for Engineering. The approach integrates learning at bachelor's degree and master's degree level with supervised work-based professional requirements. To date there are five universities validating professional engineering programmes, with more planned for 2009/10.

Renata Eyres, Linda Puttick and Paul Ward from Salford University demonstrated how the University was using the £2.99 million awarded to them from the HEFCE Strategic Development Fund (for employer engagement). They explained that the aim of their project is to develop and implement a strategy and related processes for workplace learning and employer engagement by providing cost-effective routes into and through the range of University provision.

The afternoon session consisted of small-group discussions. Information from the liaison survey was used to present delegates with a range of matters concerning the quality assurance of employer-responsive provision. These included:

- the nature of employer-responsive provision as equivalent to, but different from, traditional academic programmes
- the particular responsibilities held by awarding institution(s) in consortia arrangements/or the accreditation of company training

- the possible limitations to educational providers' ability to ensure that all learners have equivalent teaching, learning and assessment experience in the workplace
- the need to manage associated risks to academic standards and resource considerations where employers (and others) are involved in formative and summative assessment
- the balance to be achieved between academic knowledge and professional competence in the award of academic credit
- the role of external examiners in the quality assurance of employer-responsive provision
- the variety of partnership arrangements adopted
- the contribution of the learners to the design, assessment and evaluation of the unit/award.

The plenary session highlighted a range of considerations for those responsible for quality assuring employer-responsive provision and for any future QAA publications in this area:

- the need for clarity around what is meant by employer-responsive provision and its scope
- the need for clarity in the use of terms such as robust, proportionate and fit for purpose
- the need for a creative approach to quality assuring this type of provision
- the need to manage assessment in the workplace, and the involvement of employers in this assessment
- a recognition of the tension between being responsive to employers' needs and risk: the need for proportionality of approach that takes due regard in terms of management of risk
- consideration of externality in the assurance of standards
- the need to manage the tensions between education and training requirements.

Next steps

The aim of the QAA liaison officer project was to capture a variety of approaches used by institutions to employer-responsive provision and its quality assurance, and also to inform QAA of any additional support, information and guidance needed to ensure that both internal and external quality assurance arrangements are appropriate and effective.

The findings of the surveys, together with the comments from the round table discussions at the conference, will be used to compile a reflective report. This report will set out some of the ways in which institutions have interpreted the Academic Infrastructure in developing new processes or modifying existing ones.

The report will be launched at a joint **fdf**/HEA/HEFCE/QAA conference on 1 December 2009 at the Lakeside Centre, Aston University. In addition to the launch of the report, the conference will demonstrate an approach to the accreditation of employer-based company training (EBTA) by **fdf**. It will also showcase a range of approaches to the quality assurance of work-based learning and employer-responsive provision in the form of demonstrator projects from a number of institutions in receipt of funding towards employer engagement from HEFCE's Strategic Development Fund.

Wendy Stubbs, Assistant Director, QAA