

September 2015

## **The Health and Care Professions Council response to HEFCE, HEFCW and DELNI consultation on Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation on future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland published by the three Higher Education Funding Councils.
- 1.2 The HCPC is a UK wide statutory regulator of 15 health and psychological professions, as well as social workers in England, set up to protect the public. To do this we maintain a register of professionals; set standards for entry to our register; approve education and training programmes for registration; and deal with concerns where a professional may not be fit to practise.
- 1.3 Our programme approval and monitoring processes ensure that education programmes meet our standards for education and training (SETs). A programme which meets the SETs allows a student who successfully completes that programme to meet the standards of proficiency for their profession. They are then eligible to apply to HCPC for registration.
- 1.5 We have set out our comments on the proposals for future approaches to quality assessment below.

### **2. Our comments**

- 2.1 Overall we consider the proposed principles appear to be a positive step, adapting to change and increasing diversity in higher education. We welcome the funding councils' responsiveness to this.
- 2.2 Our standards are set at a 'threshold' level, a level necessary for safe and effective practice. The proposed principles go beyond this threshold to emphasise quality of student experience and promoting innovation. We are supportive of these principles.
- 2.3 The proposals place greater emphasis on the autonomy of education providers and greater reliance on their internal processes, including the submission of documents that they use for internal processes and provide to other bodies as evidence for QA. Therefore we would support this approach as a way to help increase flexibility for education providers and minimise the regulatory burden on providers.

## Maintaining HCPC Approval

- 2.3 It is important to take into consideration the need for education providers to adhere to our regulatory framework while adapting to the new proposals set out by the funding councils.
- 2.4 We require education providers to keep us informed of any significant changes to the way in which their approved programmes meet any of the SETs, so that we can assess whether they continue to meet our standards.
- 2.5 Certain areas of our approved programmes will be affected by the proposals. This may necessitate providers going through our review processes so that we can assess how changes in response to the funding council's framework, impacts on their ability to meet our SETs. For example:
- SET 3.1 requires programmes to have a secure place in the education provider's business plan. We normally want to see a business plan or other evidence to make sure that the programme is secure within the education provider, is not under any threat, and has enough support.
  - SET 3.3 requires programmes to have regular monitoring and evaluation systems in place. We do not prescribe how this standard should be met, but expect to see evidence of education providers acting on information gathered through monitoring and evaluation systems.
  - SET 6.2 requires programmes to have in place assessment processes that effectively measure compliance with external-reference frameworks. We require information about how assessment methods are effective and meet external frameworks.
- 2.6 The proposals allow differential use of the new framework between the four nations, to take into account local context. Our SETs and approval processes apply to education providers across the four nations. We would therefore welcome an approach that takes into consideration the need for approved programmes to continue to adhere to our standards regardless of the local context.

## Consultation questions

- 2.8 **Question 1: Do you agree with our proposed principles to underpin the future approach to quality assessment in established providers?**

We support the principle of proportionality in relation to QA and the recognition that different HE providers will be at different stages with respect to their quality assurance. This should be reflected in the approach to quality assessment by the funding councils.

- 2.9 **Question 2: Do you agree that our current proposals for the use of meaningful external scrutiny as set out in paragraphs 32-34 are sufficient? If you do not agree, please indicate what additional or different external scrutiny you propose and provide the reasons for this.**

The proposal to use a wide range of external scrutiny, appears to be in tension with the other aim of reducing cost. Greater clarity on how this will be achieved would be welcomed.

In addition, it would be helpful to clarify how conclusions will be drawn from different methodologies and sources of data. Reviews by statutory regulators are typically less focused on academic standards, but concerned with standards of education and training and standards of proficiency. It may be useful to carry out a mapping exercise on the specific focus of all approaches listed to ascertain how they bring additional value to a QA process rather than duplication.

**2.10 Question 3: Do you agree that future approaches to quality assessment should be based on an assumption that ‘one size’ can no longer sensibly fit all?**

Yes. In addition, assuming a well-established organisation will necessarily have sustainable and effective QA governance mechanisms also carries risks. For example, change of senior management within an organisation can positively or negatively affect the governance process.

**2.11 Question 4: Do you agree that there should be a baseline requirement for the quality of the academic experience for students, and that this should be published and maintained?**

Yes. We suggest that this should be expressed in terms of outputs and impact, rather than inputs. Different organisations will have different cultures and approaches, for example, a mix of vocational and non-vocational programmes, non-traditional entry students and variation in demographics among student populations. These variations demand different approaches to education provision and resulting student experience.

**2.12 Question 5: For England, do you agree with the proposal that an individual provider, once it has passed the gateway for entry into the publicly funded system in England, should not be repeatedly externally retested against the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience, unless material evidence suggests otherwise?**

No. We would support the use of a proportionate mechanism to ensure that the provider is able to demonstrate ongoing monitoring and review in this area. There is a risk that established providers may become disengaged over time if there is no requirement for ongoing QA.

We believe that the HCPC’s approach to open-ended approval of education and training programmes could be instructive here. We carry out annual monitoring for approved programmes which draws on both internal QA mechanisms, such as periodic review, external examiner reviews and, where relevant, other external reviews such as by professional bodies. We believe that this also provides a safeguard against established providers disengaging with QA.

Our high level SETs are intended to be flexible and non-prescriptive, which allows education providers the ability to use individualised and innovative ways to meet our standards, while engaging in regular and robust monitoring.

**2.13 Question 6: For Northern Ireland, do you agree that providers should provide annual evidence and assurance that they are meeting the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience?**

Yes, see above.

**2.14 Question 7: Do you agree that the funding bodies' verification of an institution's review methodology provides a reasonable mechanism through which to operate risk-based scrutiny of a provider's arrangements to secure a good and improving student academic experience and student outcomes?**

We would support the use of a risk-based approach to identify areas of concern so that providers may be more proactive in ensuring that programmes enable students to successfully complete their programme and meet our pre-registration standards of proficiency.

However, it is unclear whether these proposals have considered other funding bodies such as Health Education England. HEE are a principal funding body for healthcare education which should be represented in the proposals.

**2.15 Question 14: Do you agree that there should be a 'probationary period' for new entrants to the publicly funded sector in England?**

While we agree that new entrants may have a specific risk profile, it should also be recognised that significant changes within established providers may also pose a risk. Such changes may include forming a new partnership, or responding to increased marketisation or other changes in the wider context of the changing higher education landscape. As stated above, there is a risk that established providers may disengage with QA if there is no requirement for ongoing review. We would support ongoing QA mechanisms for all providers, whether they are new entrants or established, particularly when significant changes have occurred.

**2.16 Question 16: Do you agree that a future quality assessment system must provide reliable assurances to students and other stakeholders about the maintenance of academic output standards and their reasonable comparability across the UK higher education system?**

Yes. The public need to have confidence in regulatory processes, including the approval and monitoring of programmes that confer eligibility to students to register as health and care professionals. Approaches should be reliable and consistent in order for students and other stakeholders to have confidence in the system.

**2.17 Question 20: Do you agree that providers should use the accreditation activities of at least some PSRBs more centrally in future approaches to quality assessment?**

Yes, we would welcome an approach that further embeds monitoring processes by regulatory bodies into quality assessment.

However, it should be recognised that the focus and purpose of quality assurance by a statutory regulator differs from that of a professional body – the former being the protection of the public, and the latter being the development of the profession. These are not mutually exclusive, however may result in a different approach to accreditation or approval. Statutory regulators have to work within clearly defined legislation; professional bodies are not likely to have the same constraints.

It is also important to note that there is potential for situations to arise where one process relies on the integrity of another. For example a statutory regulator assuming HE providers have robust QA governance, as evidenced by successful QAA reviews. A situation could be created where each body is relying on evidence provided by the other, thereby jeopardising their independence and the robustness of monitoring processes.

**2.18 Question 21: Do you agree with the proposal that we should place more emphasis on the role of the governing body of a provider with degree awarding powers to provide assurances about security and reasonable comparability of the academic output standards of students?**

We would support increased emphasis on academic standards and student experience at governing body level. We currently approve programmes both in and outside higher education. Clear governance and accountability is key across all providers, whether or not they have degree awarding powers.

**2.19 Question 23: Do you agree with our proposals to develop and implement a strengthened mechanism to investigate rapidly when there is an indication of serious problems within an individual provider which has not been addressed in a satisfactory and timely manner?**

We would support a proposal to investigate in both a timely and thorough manner. The quality of findings and corrective actions is important to ensure problems are effectively rectified. It would also be helpful to find a way to share learning from such events with other regulators.

**2.20 Question 25: Do you agree with the proposal that providers seeking entry to the publicly funded sector in England and Northern Ireland should be tested, through an external peer review scrutiny process, against a set of baseline requirements for quality?**

Yes

**2.21 Question 26: Are there any particular areas of our proposals that you feel we should concentrate on as we undertake a more detailed design phase?**

We would welcome more detailed consideration of the relationship between the funding councils and HCPC (and other professional regulators with similar functions), other commissioners of higher education, particularly in the health and care sectors, and professional bodies. The diversity of these organisations is huge, in terms of purpose, scope and operation, and this needs to be taken into consideration as more detailed design is undertaken.