

Summary: Employer-responsive provision survey - A reflective report

Key points from each section of the report are briefly summarised.

Academic Infrastructure and Code of practice

- The report noted broad consensus around the belief that QA should use the same principles for work related provision as for mainstream provision with an acceptance that processes may need to be different.
 - The academic infrastructure should be applied with rigour, in a way that is commensurate with the scale of initiatives and wherever possible using mainstream processes and mechanisms.
- HEI's all face the challenge of balancing speed and rigour when working with employers.
- The Code of practice relating to work-based provision (sections 2 and 9) should be seen as a guide and not a set of constraints. The code doesn't directly cater for complex partnerships and so should be a source of reference to inform decision making in employer engagement design.

Rigour in QA

- QA processes should
 - Work on timescales acceptable to employers.
 - Be proportionate to the complexity (and therefore risk) of developments.
- The risks associated with employer-responsive provision are categorised as: Reputational risk, financial risk, risk to academic standards, risk to academic culture and risk to academic quality (can the site of learning facilitate the meeting of learning outcomes?).
- Risk reduction was perceived as being possible in-part through legally binding contracts, shell modules and through the creation of standard offerings that can be tweaked by different employers.
- Risk may be managed in accordance with credit volumes. HEI's are encouraged to interpret the Code of practice and apply it in their context; the QAA does not give a threshold credit volume at which codes must be applied.
- In addition to credit volume, QA measures may also be weighted according to: the student numbers involved; whether a partner is new or established; who is involved in delivery and assessment; geography and, the experience and understanding of partners regarding higher education content and level.
- QA for employer-responsive provision should consider: partnership agreements; setting and maintaining academic standards; quality of learning opportunities and the involvement of parties in design, delivery and assessment.
- The ability of HEI's to have control over the learning environment for employer-responsive provision may be limited e.g. when an employer uses in-house delivery or delivery through a third party. In such circumstances there was broad acceptance amongst the survey respondents that the responsibility of the HEI is to ensure that the environment lends itself to learners achieving the necessary learning outcomes and that the environment is appropriate. The emphasis is on appropriateness of, rather than equivalence of, experience.
- Monitoring procedures should be used to assure quality throughout delivery. Examples of this include: learner and partner feedback, on-site visits of collaborating organisations and external examiner reports on both the site of learning and on the delivery of learning.
- Serial franchising is defined as 'an arrangement in which an awarding institution enters into a collaborative agreement with a partner organisation who, in turn, uses that arrangement as a basis for establishing collaborations of its own with third parties, but offering the institution's awards' (p13). Serial franchising, it is stated, can jeopardise standards and leave HEI's without a clear view of what is being done in their name.
- HEI's can and do devolve responsibilities but recognise that they have responsibility for and so need oversight of all summative assessment decisions.

Setting up provision

- Validation – should be to an appropriate time scale which may be helped by shell frameworks, revisions to APEL policy, formation of new committees that can respond quickly and the use of contracts with employers.
- Due diligence – HEI's are encouraged to ensure good standing of prospective partners (Section 2 of the Code of practice outlines minimum due diligence as including checks on the legal status of the partner and its capacity to contract with the HEI).
- Financial consideration – risks that may be considered include bankruptcy of a partner, withdrawal of the partner, withdrawal before the break-even point is reached and start-up/wind-down costs.
- Conflicts of interest should be considered when setting up initiatives (e.g. employer acting as mentor too much, learner-employer disputes).
- Learner as partner – it may be helpful in the setting up of initiatives to see the learner as a partner in the arrangement. In this way other partners are encouraged to make their responsibilities to the learner clear.

Teaching, learning and assessment

- Institutions can delegate the management of learning so long as the partner has the capacity to undertake that management, the HEI still has responsibility to ensure that the learning environment is fit for purpose at the outset and throughout the life of the arrangement.
- HEI's have responsibility for monitoring the suitability of all delivery staff. This may mean that partners report back to the HEI's on the qualifications and preparedness of their staff.
- Competence of partners to deliver may be assessed formally e.g. via cv's but also through the understandings reached through discussions.
- There is an expectation that HEI's will have a direct relationship with those conducting assessment.
- HEI's should recognise the possibility for competing priorities in the workplace and so to ensure fairness may consider adapting assessment regulations.
- Assessment should balance professional competence and academic knowledge. Employers are most likely to be involved in the assessment of professional competence and/or formative assessment; all but one survey response indicated that marking was undertaken solely by academic staff.
- External examiner processes were designed for traditional awards and are not always suited to small credit awards. HEI's are encouraged to apply arrangements appropriately e.g. some institutions do not have external scrutiny for units less than 20 credits. .
- The need to ensure practice based assessments can be scrutinised by external examiners/subject boards is emphasised by the report.

Academic credit

- For the award of credit it is the achievement of the intended learning outcomes rather than the how or where the learning takes place that is important.
- To establish credit values discussion is needed but responsibility rests with the HEI. Survey respondents thought it important to emphasise academic credit cannot be attached to all learning and credit is a measure of achievement and is not a kite marking exercise.
- Creating coherence within shell modules and awards remains as a challenge; work in this area is ongoing and no overall clear view has yet emerged on best practice.
- HEI's need to determine their own expectations for incoming credit and experience (what evidence will be used to show the reliability and value of credit accrued from other sources).

The full report is available on the QAA website <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/employers/EffectiveProvision.pdf>