

Quality assurance of undergraduate education by the health professional regulators

Policy summary

One of the key functions of health professional regulation is to assure the quality of education and training courses for students. In 2008, Lord Darzi in his report *A High Quality Workforce* asked us to look into the quality assurance processes applied by the regulatory bodies to the Higher Education Institutions providing undergraduate healthcare programmes. We found that the regulators' involvement in quality assurance is not questioned by education providers and it is valued for the confidence and specific expertise it provides. However, regulators are only one of a number of parties with an interest in undergraduate health programmes. Funders and commissioners, and professional organisations, are also involved. There is concern about the total impact and possible overlap of different quality assurance type processes on higher education. In our report we conclude it would be impractical to try to seek a definitive solution to these different interests and it may be more productive to focus on establishing ways to live with change and manage any tensions that arise.

Background

The health professional regulators have a responsibility to protect patient and public safety. One of the ways they carry out this responsibility is by ensuring that the training and education received by health professionals enables them to practise safely and competently. The regulators do this by setting standards for education and training in their field. They assure that education providers are delivering the education and training in a way that meets these standards.

In 2008 we were asked to provide advice on the way regulators assure the quality of undergraduate education for health professionals.

What did we do?

We asked the regulators about their approach and reviewed the processes they use to ensure that undergraduate education is of the appropriate quality. We examined the broader context of quality assurance in education, looking at the other quality assurance exercises that education providers are involved in and views on the impact of these exercises

We received feedback from people working in higher education about quality assurance processes. We asked the regulators to tell us what they considered to be good practice in this area, and looked at studies of good practice carried out by other organisations.

What did we find out?

Completing an undergraduate healthcare programme means different things in different professions. In some professions, graduates can register with the relevant regulatory body and begin to practise as soon as they have completed an undergraduate course. For others, completing an undergraduate course may lead to another period of training before they eventually apply to join the register. This variation means that there are some differences in the regulators' approaches to quality assuring undergraduate education.

We found that the regulators' approaches showed broad similarities. Each followed a general pattern of approving education programmes, monitoring them and periodically re-approving them. They also approve any significant changes to education programmes. However there are differences in how, and how often, they carry out these responsibilities.

The regulators reported a number of ways in which they keep up to date with changes in practice and manage the impact of these changes on undergraduate education. For example, they periodically review their standards of conduct and performance, and these influence the standards relating to education.

We found that the regulators use standards to describe outcomes that need to be achieved by students, rather than prescribing the specific processes that education providers should use to achieve them. Other measures, such as the use of peer reviewers to give a contemporary perspective on practice, are used.

Education providers are reviewed by the regulators and by other bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency, external examiners, strategic health authorities and in some cases, professional bodies. These organisations have overlapping but distinct interests in the quality of the education provided. Education providers told us that the regulators' role in quality assurance is appropriate and helpful. However they had concerns with some institutions feeling regulators' processes are not as proportionate or targeted as they could be. They were concerned about the cumulative impact of the different quality assurance processes, including the regulators', on education. Where other organisations have an interest in education standards, the regulators told us they work to ensure that they co-ordinate quality assurance activities wherever possible.

Feedback from regulators and other quality assurance bodies enabled us to identify a

set of characteristics for good practice in quality assurance of undergraduate health professional education. These will form the basis for further discussions with the regulators and other stakeholders prior to our annual performance review in 2009/10.

What did we conclude?

Quality assurance of undergraduate education programmes by regulators is necessary to ensure patient safety and maintain the integrity of the regulators' registers of health professionals. We believe it should be carried out in a proportionate, transparent and focused way.

Some differences in the regulators' approaches to quality assurance are inevitable because of the different role undergraduate education plays in their professions and because the regulators work in different ways.

Given that many different agencies have an interest in quality assurance of education programmes, greater clarity is needed about the respective roles of these agencies, including the regulators' role. All regulators must be able to show how their requirements link in a proportionate way to patient safety.

We will work with the regulators and other stakeholders to review our standards of good regulation in relation to the quality assurance of education. The review will take into account current perspectives on good practice. Through our performance review of the regulators, we will continue to encourage changes that improve the transparency and proportionality of their processes.

For further information, please visit www.chre.org.uk

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