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A broad and strategic approach to quality

The Higher Education Quality Council in South Africa is the latest in a line of agencies to release details of its criteria and processes for quality assurance (Scotland – VC-Net 36, Australia and UK – VC-Net 26). The details have been a long time in preparation, but they are unusually wide ranging and contain some unique features.

The remit of the HEQC applies to all providers of higher education in the country, including foreign owned institutions and is linked to the national objectives for the strategic transformation of the sector. Quality is defined in this context. However it is also interpreted within a framework of fitness for purpose since the HEQC states "with due allowance for mission differentiation and diversity, institutional audits assess whether institutions manage the quality of their core academic activities in a manner that is fit for purpose.., addresses transformational changes…and provides value for money".

An unusual feature is that HEQC's institutional audits will cover teaching and learning, research and community engagement. Nineteen criteria have been set down to assist self reviews and audits in these areas and against each there are statements of what the HEQC would expect to find if the institution is to meet the criterion. Thus, for example, criterion 5 relates to the quality management of 'short courses, exported and partnership programmes' and sets out expectations about the way they should be planned, delivered and reviewed.

Two of the criteria relate to research and postgraduate education; one is of general applicability and the other applies only to the more research intensive institutions. They cover topics such as a policy for research, capacity development for researchers, research information systems, supervision of postgraduates and policies and structures for the commercialisation of research. One criterion covers 'community engagement' and requires its quality management to be formalised and integrated with all other teaching and learning activities.

Another unusual feature is the emphasis given to benchmarking, user surveys and impact studies which are covered by one of the criteria. Institutions are expected to engage in regular external benchmarking against suitable peers and to use regular internal surveys of students, graduate and employers to provide feedback on performance.

The whole package presents a very challenging task, particularly for the institutions that are either recovering from, or just entering, a merger process and this is recognised by the HEQC, since these institutions will be exempted from the full scale audits until 2007. The others are not so lucky and will begin to receive visits from specially trained audit panels commencing this year.

Source: The two HEQC reports can be found on the site of the Council for Higher Education at www.che.ac.za. They are: *Framework for institutional audits* and *Criteria for institutional audits.* June 2004.

The national research funding spiral continues.

In yet another twist to the spiral of competitive investment in national research capacity the UK has announced an ambitious ten year plan of investment in science and innovation. It reflects the personal interest of the Chancellor of the Exchequer in such matters and his ability to integrate the plans of the three government departments involved.

The overriding goal is to close the gap between the UK and the USA as regards the national investment in R&D (which is currently 1.86 percent of GDP for the UK as opposed to 2.67 percent for the USA). The largest gulf is in the investment that business makes in both countries – 1.24 percent for the UK compared with 1.87 percent in the USA and this has been a longstanding deficiency. It was one of the reasons behind the Lambert Report in 2003 (VC Net-43) which studied university-business interaction and identified the reluctance of business to engage with the skills and research capacity of higher education as a key problem.

The UK government plans to increase spending on science by 5.8 percent in real terms over the next three years as part of a ten year drive to achieve a 2.5 percent of GDP target. This means that the budgets of both the Research Councils and the higher education Funding Councils will have more to distribute to universities. Half a billion pounds a year will continue to be spent in strengthening the research infrastructure in universities. Central government investment in knowledge transfer networks and collaborative research with business is also expected to grow, as is a new stream of funding for universities and business through regional development agencies. Investment in people is not forgotten, particularly related to attempts to increase the proportion of women and minority participants in higher education and research activities.

The report in which these plans are set out includes an Annex on the economic case for further investment in science and research and one which sets demanding targets for world class excellence with indicators such as the UK's share of world citations and the comparative achievements of the 'top ten universities'. In the difficult area of persuading business to invest in R&D, narrowing the gap with competitors is seen as a strategic priority, but the Framework is not wholly convincing as to how this will be achieved; not only have similar government pleas gone unheeded in the past but the increasingly global spread of the major corporations mean that R&D decisions are often influenced by global rather than UK factors. Nonetheless, the Chancellor is clearly hoping that an increase in the UK's stock of well qualified and equipped researchers will be influential in choices between competitor nations.

Source: HM Treasury: Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014. Available from www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_review/spend_sr04/associated_documents

Family friendly staffing policies

Increasing the proportion of female staff in universities is an almost universal ambition that often proves very hard for managers to achieve. Even if the recruitment barriers are overcome, the pressures of managing both academic and family lives prove too much for the individual. Canadian institutions are tackling this by developing family friendly policies that help and support those female staff who wish to have children. In the current issue of the AUCC's journal *University Affairs* a number of case studies are described of positive support by institutions keen to retain and nurture their female staff. The University of Waterloo's web site lists "an array of child care, elderly care, maternity benefits and leaves, support services and programs to help its staff". The article provides a checklist of policy options drawn from Canadian institutions.

In England similar considerations have been adopted by Staffordshire University, one of the case study institutions in the good practice guide on 'Implementing HR Strategies' published by HEFCE. Measures to increase the number of women managers from 32 percent to 40

percent included the introduction of flexible working arrangements as well as the removal of name and gender information from application forms for recruitment and senior appointments.

Source: www.universityaffairs.ca June/July 2004 *In a family way.* The University of Waterloo policies are at www.hr.waterloo.ca/family-friendly.html HEFCE publication 2003/37 *Implementing HR strategies: a guide to good practice*. Available on www.hefce.ac.uk/pubns

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The editor, Svava Bjarnason, and author, John Fielden, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.
