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A dramatic re-accreditation

One is not accustomed to quality assurance agencies producing dramatic reports; but this has just happened in South Africa with the Higher Education Quality Council's first national review, of MBAs. The exercise was billed as a re-accreditation and was the first test of a new methodology for assessing the quality of national provision in one subject. The process which has taken two years involved a review of 37 MBA programmes in 27 schools or institutions. Only 7 of these programmes have been fully accredited, while 15 have been conditionally accredited and 15 have not been accredited at all, due to their failure to meet enough of the minimum standards in the 13 agreed criteria.

A look at those who failed introduces a contentious note, since five of them are private or overseas providers and include the South African enterprises of Bond University, de Montfort University and the Business School of the Netherlands. No private or overseas programmes are among the 7 programmes gaining full accreditation, although the list of conditionally accredited institutions includes Damelin International College and the South African offshoot of Henley Management College from the UK. The process used was extremely thorough and included self-evaluation, a site visit and an evaluation report; it has been praised by those who survived it, even by some with only conditional accreditation.

The rationale for tackling the MBA as the first national review is linked to South Africa's wish to be a key player in the knowledge economy with the MBA as a key bridge between higher education - business programmes must therefore aim to be world class in their standards. However, the 13 criteria adopted for assessing each programme also send another message. As well as the obvious factors such as the quality of the faculty, learning objectives, assessment practices and research focus, some of the criteria reflect national policy guidelines, for example "Criterion number 1 states "the MBA programme has to be an integral part of the national higher education system as well as of the relevant institution" and number 13 states "the School is active in the field of management and contributes to the improvement of management in society". Both these may not be easy for foreign providers to achieve.

Accreditation is also in the news in the USA where a new bill called HR 4283 (Higher Education Act Re-authorization) is causing consternation in the accreditation community, since they believe it will authorize government intrusion in academic quality in higher education. The reason for this dismay is a proposed increase in the reporting and accountability requirements on accreditation agencies, as well as new federal guidelines on credit transfer, distance education and measuring student outcomes.

Sources: MBA re-accreditation at www.che.ac.za/news/special_issue2004_mba.index.php and the US bill is described in Council for Higher Education Accreditation HEA Update no 9, May 7th 2004.

Evaluating research excellence in New Zealand

After a delay, while some offending international comparisons were removed, New Zealand has now published the results of its first Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) quality evaluation which was held in 2003. The report is an analysis of the research activity in 22 institutions including the 8 universities. The methodology is based on panels of academic peers assessing 'evidence portfolios' of research submitted by eligible researchers and is very similar to that followed in the United Kingdom. Thirty-three of the 165 panel members were from other countries.

The assessment classified research outputs as 'A' if of world class standard, 'B' if deemed very good quality, 'C' good quality and 'R' for the rest. These were weighted 10, 6, 2 and 0 respectively and the total scores added for each institution. Just over 7400 full time staff participated in the exercise and of these 5.7 percent were placed in the 'A' category and 40 in the 'R' category. The leading five universities in terms of their FTE weighted quality scores were Auckland (3.96), Canterbury (3.83), Victoria (3.39), Otago (3.23) and Waikato (2.98). The PBRF report concludes that "on virtually any measure the University of Auckland is the country's leading research university. Not only did it achieve the highest quality score but it has also by far the largest share of A-rated researchers in the country (35.9 percent, FTE weighted)."

The funding which follows the PBRF quality evaluation is intended to replace an earlier method based wholly on student numbers, but the PBRF quality rankings will be only one of three indicators used in the new allocations. The other two are research degree completions (25 percent of the total) and external research income (15 percent of the total). However, the new methods will not be fully reflected in allocations until 2007, a year after the next quality evaluation.

New Zealand's universities will now be developing their strategies for the 2006 PBRF Round. One tactic which UK institutions have begun to perfect is the strategic selection (or is it rigorous pruning?) of those researchers put forward for inclusion. At the national level such an Evaluation raises interesting issues as to what action, if any, should be taken to remedy those areas of research where the country is weakest – or does the country have to accept that with a small higher education system it can only be excellent in a few areas?

Sources: New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission: Performance Based Research Fund. Evaluating Research Excellence. Available on www.tec.govt.nz/downloads/a2z_publications/pbrf_report_overview.pdf Campus Review, May 5th 2004, p.11.

Institutional evaluation and benchmarking

The European University Association (EUA) is celebrating ten years of its institutional evaluation programme, a voluntary peer review exercise in which four experts make two visits to a university after it has completed a self evaluation report on its strategic management. Over the period the evaluations have covered 115 institutions in 31 European countries as well as South Africa, Chile, Peru and Brazil.

At the heart of the reviews are four strategic questions, which the EUA sees as central to helping an institution develop its management strategy and its internal quality culture. The questions are:

- * what is the institution trying to do?
- * how is the institution trying to do it?
- * how does it know it works?
- * how does the institution change in order to improve?

Using a peer review approach to discussing these questions has been found to be very effective, and independent evaluations of the process have confirmed the benefits from the reviews.

The ACU's Commonwealth University Benchmarking Programme is another internationally based approach to improving quality, and is a similar age entering its ninth year of operation. This programme also operates at a senior management level and enables a group of universities to exchange ideas about how they manage particular university processes or activities that they have chosen to review. A workshop of participants at the end of a self review process encourages debate on how to improve quality in each of the activities.

Sources: EUA Newsletter 10/2004 available on www.eua.org. ACU Benchmarking at www.acu.ac.uk

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.

