



How Higher Education Providers Work With Professional Bodies

Introduction

This paper provides the outcomes of a survey we conducted with QAA Members to learn more about the relationship colleges and universities have with the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) who accredit their provision.

Higher education providers have a rich history of working closely with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Accreditation is the primary source of interaction, where key professional competencies are embedded into programmes, forming part of the PSRB qualification requirements. These programmes typically have additional quality processes set by the PSRB on top of the provider's own.

This is only part of the picture, however, with new approaches to qualifications and assurance developing across the regulated professions, and wider, optional accreditations emerging in areas like business.

QAA convenes a [forum of PSRBs and accredited providers](#) twice a year. At the forum, we provide updates on new developments in higher education for professional bodies and discuss topics of interest to the sector.

Given the growth in accreditation activity, we considered the time was right to find out more about the relationship colleges and universities have with PSRBs and the quality issues associated with running accredited courses. We asked providers directly, via a survey run in early 2024, with the aim of sharing our findings with QAA Members and PSRBs at our dedicated forum, and publishing some further ways the relationship can be enhanced.

Key findings

The responses gave us valuable insights in a number of areas, which are summarised briefly below. We have taken these insights and made a series of recommendations, for providers and PSRBs, which follow these key findings.

Responsibility for monitoring accreditation of provision

Monitoring of accreditation processes is typically a shared responsibility across various roles and departments within HE providers.

Key roles involved in the management of accreditations include Academic Registry, quality teams, Faculty heads, Programme Directors, dedicated committees and course leaders.

Organisational oversight

Oversight of accreditation processes is typically a multi-level responsibility, shared between institutional-level committees, faculties and departments/schools managing their own accreditation.

Changes in PSRB accreditations

Providers observed that the number of PSRB-accredited subjects has either increased or remained steady in recent years.

Additional accreditations

Over half of the respondents have additional accreditations beyond those required for professional practice.

Reaccreditation frequency

The frequency of reaccreditation varies, with periods ranging from annual to every three to six years - with five years being the most common.

Alignment with institutional periodic review

Institutions do attempt to synchronise accreditation processes with periodic review, but this is often complicated due to different timelines set by PSRBs. Beyond timing matters, providers are trying to align accreditation and their internal review activity, often involving efforts to reuse documentation between professional body visits and their own review activity.

Role of external examiners

The relationship between accreditation and the role of external examiners varies. In some processes, PSRBs do not require the input of external examiners; in others, the accrediting body requires sight of external examiner reports, and others invite external examiners for interviews. At the far end of the scale, PSRBs directly appoint externals who report to the PSRB (in addition to the provider).

Analysis of accreditation outcomes

Most respondents analysed outcomes from accreditation activities, which are considered through committees, boards and shared across institutions to enhance quality and prepare for future accreditations.

Enhancement

Interactions with PSRBs are generally seen as beneficial, leading to enhancements in policy and/or practice, although the extent of this varied depending on the PSRB.

Recommendations

The feedback we received through this survey has been insightful and helpful. We have made a number of recommendations based on providers' views, and discussed them at our [PSRB forum](#) meeting in May 2024, and our [Conversations with Quality Leads](#) session in June 2024, to gather further reflections.

There are two sets of recommendations - one for providers, and one for PSRBs.

Recommendations for providers

Providers could consider how the accreditation of courses operates strategically - in particular, the level of departmental autonomy or centralised management that takes place. The balance may have grown organically over time, and may work well, but a strategic view

should allow providers to consider whether the balance between these approaches is functioning well. This should also consider the governance structures that provide oversight of accreditation to ensure it continues to be fit-for-purpose.

Providers could think about the role that professional accreditation plays, and how it complements, or overlaps with, their own quality systems and processes:

- a Do accreditation outcomes inform the evidence bases for the provider's own regular monitoring activity?
- b Are there any efficiencies or streamlining that could take place without reducing the effectiveness of either process?
- c Are there systems in place for highlighting any issues raised through accreditation activity to quality teams? For providers in England, this is important as failing to adhere to PSRB standards is one indicator to the Office for Students (OfS) that the provider may not be meeting the B Conditions.

Providers could consider how well aligned their internal course reapproval systems are with PSRB reaccreditation dates, and ask themselves the following questions:

- a Is there value in aligning the exercises - for example, to reduce burden on staff responsible for these processes? Alignment might involve a spectrum of activity from sharing documentation to coordinating the visit dates.
- b Is good practice identified from accreditation activity, and shared appropriately within the institution?

Providers could review the way they record accredited programmes within their record systems, and ask themselves these questions:

- a Do you know how many accreditations you hold?
- b Do you know when provision is due for reaccreditation, and what this involves?

Recommendations for PSRBs

PSRBs could consider the information they require from providers during accreditation and reaccreditation, and the extent to which providers' internal monitoring and course approval processes, and external examiner arrangements, already address areas that the PSRB wishes to scrutinise.

PSRBs could consider whether their requirements support pedagogical development and innovation, or whether any particular requirements are stifling them.

Where PSRBs require a single point of contact within providers for accreditation in academic departments, they could consider whether they could also have an additional contact in quality teams to account for the roles these teams play in the quality assurance of academic standards. Having an additional contact may also help build resilience against, for example, any unexpected leave of absence.

PSRBs could consider the [HESA guidelines on accrediting bodies](#) and ensure that their entries on the [list of accrediting bodies](#) are accurate. This will help to ensure that providers are able to accurately and consistently publish information about accredited courses. Where PSRBs are not on the list, or their details are out of date or inaccurate, they should contact HESA.

Next steps

We will continue to explore the relationship between PSRBs and providers through our regular networks, especially our PSRB Forum which meets twice a year.

Results from the 2024 survey

The sections that follow provide the full outcomes from the 2024 survey.

In March 2024, we asked providers a series of questions to gain insights into the way they work with PSRBs, and whether there were any areas where we might use our convening power to make the relationships function even better.

62 people responded to the survey, from 51 different institutions. 52 respondents were from providers based in England, five from Scotland and five from Wales.

There were 39 distinct roles, including Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education and Student Experience, Academic Registrar, Head of Quality and Standards, and various others associated with quality assurance and academic administration within educational institutions.

The following analysis uses the survey questions as headings, looking at oversight of accreditation, the use of external examiners, and how providers use the outcomes from accreditation activity to enhance their provision.

Who in your organisation is responsible for monitoring accreditation (or equivalent) processes by PSRBs?

The responsibility for monitoring accreditation processes by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) varied within organisations, but it is typically a shared responsibility that involves multiple roles and departments. The key roles/teams involved included:

- Academic Registry, which often worked in conjunction with departments to oversee the monitoring of accreditation arrangements
- quality teams
- faculty heads, reporting to higher authorities like the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Quality)
- schools - with specific responsibility falling to Programme Directors
- dedicated committees
- course leaders.

These roles and teams collaborate with various committees and academic offices to ensure compliance with PSRB standards and maintain quality assurance across the organisation. Responsibilities were often shared between schools and central quality teams.

There were also multi-level responsibilities described; for instance, at the institutional level, the responsibility sat with a committee, such as a sub-committee of the University's Board. The University's Education Board had overall responsibility for monitoring the quality and standards of all programmes. At the next level came faculties, which in some cases had monitoring responsibility. Next came schools, which might have dedicated accreditation teams, and then, at some providers, individual programmes were responsible for gaining accreditation and renewing it.

'This is a combined effort by the School Quality and Standards Committee (SQSC), School Governance Officer, course leader and subject leader. The

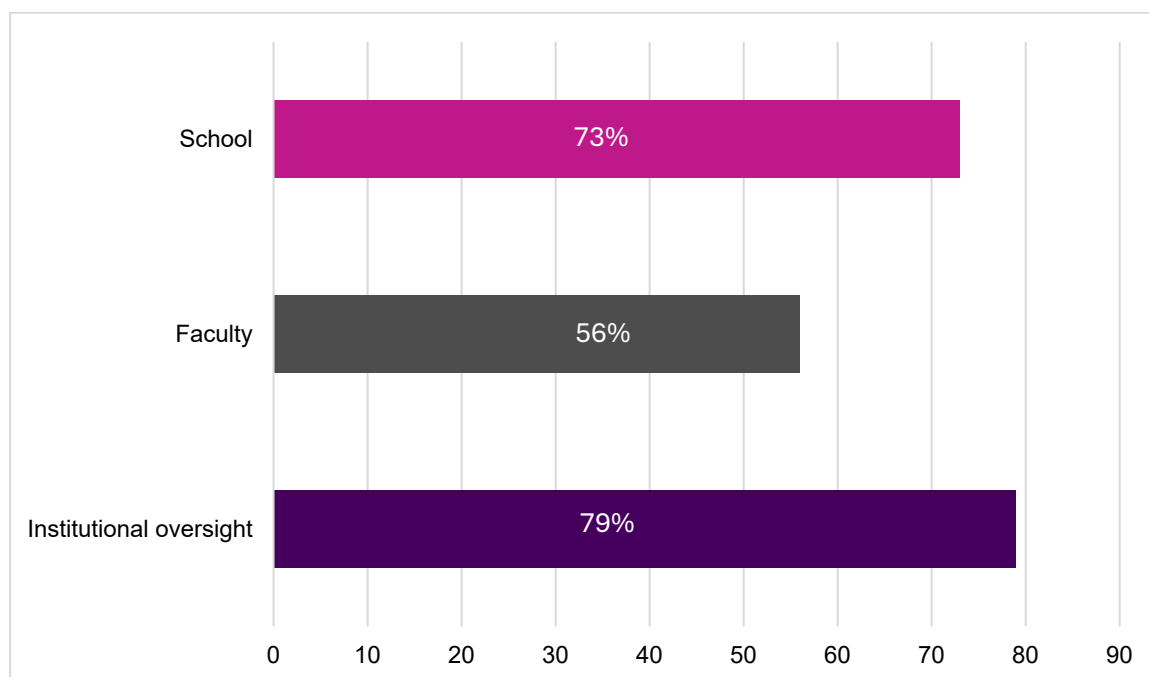
necessity/information comes from the course leader to the subject leader and goes to the governance officer and SQSC.'

One provider acknowledged that while individual programmes managed their own accreditation, and there were sub-committees of their Board providing oversight, they were missing faculty-level monitoring. In some cases, the input of the quality team was simply to keep a register with most of the practical liaison being devolved to schools. In others, responsibility was wholly devolved to departments.

One provider talked about the central quality team maintaining a database of accreditations with their start and end dates, another mentioned a biannual reporting process. At the other end of the scale, one central quality team effectively managed all accreditation across their provider, acting as the formal correspondents with PSRBs and the liaison point between PSRBs and their schools. They submitted the applications for (re)accreditation and managed practical arrangements for visits.

Overall, institutional-level oversight was the most common approach, followed by school and faculty level.

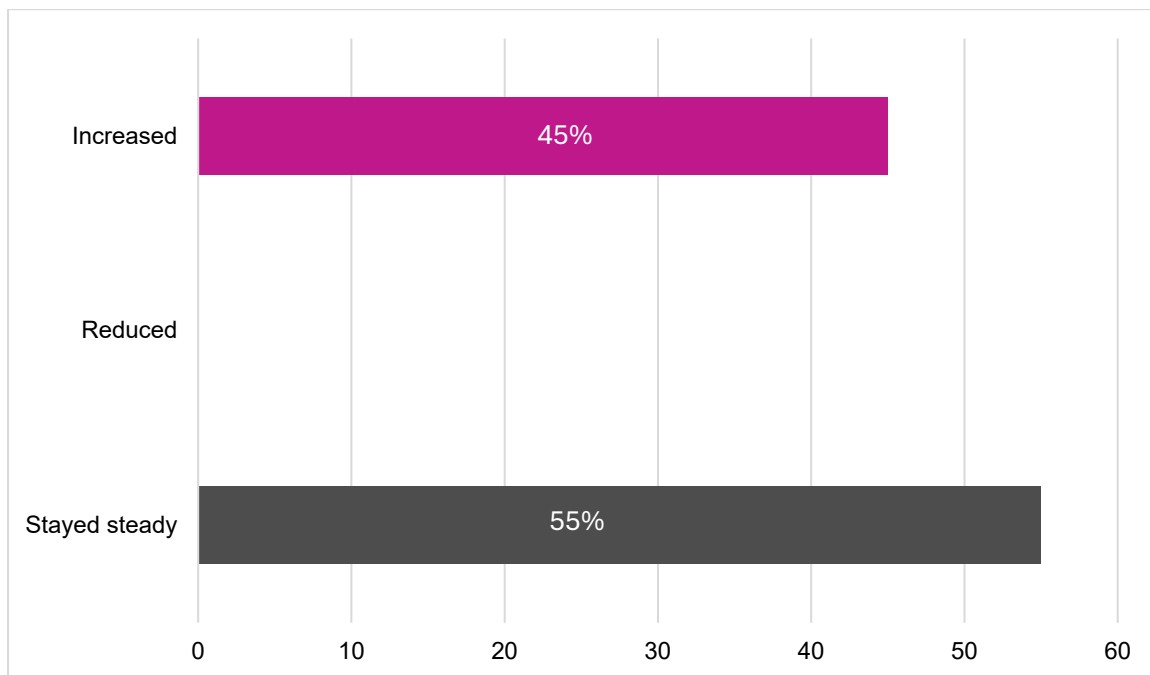
Figure 1: Organisational oversight requirements



Have PSRB and/or learned society subject association accreditations increased in recent years, reduced in number or stayed relatively steady?

Providers have not seen PSRB-accredited subject decrease in recent years, with either just under half seeing an increase, and just over half seeing no change.

Figure 2: Change in PSRB accreditations



Do you have additional accreditations for non-regulated professions that don't require the qualification to register for professional practice?

Over half of respondents had additional accreditations beyond those required for professional practice. These included the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), the Academy of Medical Educators, and the College of Paramedics, as well as courses in business, management and leadership, creative arts, technology and health.

Providers saw these accreditations as an enhancement to the courses, and some had accreditations that were operated at school rather than course level; for example, AACSB in business schools:

'We see these accreditations as an enhancement to the course in terms of Value Added.'

One provider had a policy aim to pursue accreditation wherever possible.

Four did not know, and 15 said they did not have this type of accreditation.

How often do you need to reaccredit courses?

The frequency of reaccreditation for courses varied depending on the specific context and accrediting body. Examples given were for between three and six years, some were even annual, but five years seemed to be the most common. Some PSRBs had different approaches, with desktop approval or institutional review visits.

Longer periods could be supplemented by a requirement to submit documentation each year. One provider did not have a process for regular reaccreditation of programmes. Another noted that requirements were reducing in general, with some reaccreditation dates being determined by the PSRB following submission of data.

'The need to reaccredit courses is reducing. The HCPC, for example, has moved to ongoing accreditation with the regular submission of Performance Reviews, the date for which are determined by relevant data and the outcome of the review. The NMC has also moved to ongoing accreditation, supported by periodic reviews. Otherwise, reaccreditation is typically every five years, e.g. Social Work England.'

Similarly, another noted that professional accredited degrees had five-year accreditation periods, but non-professional courses were renewed annually with reaccreditation only being required if curricula had changed significantly.

How do you align your accreditation processes with institutional periodic review?

Some institutions try to merge accreditation with periodic review or schedule them to coincide, while others find it challenging due to different timelines. Many institutions handle accreditation and periodic review as separate processes, with some attempting to align them when possible. Some stopped short of formal alignment but used the outcomes of accreditation to inform their internal review process. One provider stated that there were PSRBs that required review or revalidation to have happened in advance of their reaccreditation process.

Institutions also attempted to incorporate accreditation outcomes into their strategic planning and quality enhancement processes. Alignment is often complicated by the varying requirements and review periods of different PSRBs. One provider explicitly said they were not linked. Another adopted a flexible, cooperative approach:

'I work closely with the PSRB and the Academic teams to ensure alignment - if this process is out of sync we either reapprove courses early or a request is sent to the PSRB for an extension so that alignment can take place.'

One provider was concerned that a PSRB required them to submit their institutional review documentation and used them to set conditions or make recommendations that were 'beyond their remit'.

One provider also stated that they were moving away from periodic review towards ongoing monitoring, with outcomes from PSRB accreditations feeding into this.

What is the relationship between accreditation and the role of external examiners?

Again, this varied. For some, there was no formal relationship. Others had experience of their 'good' external examiners feeding into accreditation informally.

'I would say that externals on programme approval are very attuned to accreditation needs and a good one will help point out strengths and weaknesses even though they are not acting in a formal accreditation capacity.'

Some PSRBs required external examiner reports as part of their review processes, or in some cases, interviewed them directly. This also worked in another way, where external examiners were required by the provider to have oversight of accreditation activities.

One provider asked their external examiners to comment on whether programmes were in line with accreditation standards; given that the Office for Students (OfS) state that failure to meet PSRB standards could risk compliance with B Conditions, it may be surprising that this approach is not more common in England.

'They are asked as part of their annual report "Can you confirm that the course meets Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body Requirements (only applicable for External Examiners reviewing professionally accredited courses)." The report requires further detail if a negative response is given.'

In some accreditations, there is a requirement for the external examiner to hold a relevant professional qualification, such as Social Work England, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, British Psychological Society, and the Health and Care Professions Council. This can go further - for the Bar Practice Course, the Bar Standards Board (BSB) appoints the external examiners, who then report directly to the BSB. The BSB will follow up with the provider if there are any queries raised.

It was also noted that the role of examiners is crucial to apprenticeship provision.

Do you analyse the outcomes from accreditation activity?

Nine respondents did not analyse the outcomes from accreditation activity. The majority of respondents did analyse those outcomes, which were considered through committees and boards. Quality teams also shared PSRB feedback across their institutions to share good practice and help programme teams prepare for other accreditations. Outcomes were also shared with student representative forums.

'There is a University-wide "accreditations action plan" which is monitored on a monthly basis - this document has key dates for accreditation Annual Monitoring, renewal etc. In addition, we have an "Accreditations Grid" which outlines the various rules & regs for each accrediting body - this enables oversight in keys areas.'

There were also examples of faculties compiling reports using accreditation outcomes as a basis.

'We like to hold records of all accreditations, review the outcomes, and note in the annual reflective reviews of each course, which then feed into the quality reviews of schools, therefore it is embedded into the quality assurance processes.'

'At School level, reports and outcomes are followed up, and then fed up through Faculty to University level. At central level, an education committee looks at all reports that come through and follows up where necessary. Good practice can also be shared more widely through this. A yearly overview report of discussions on accreditation at central level is produced.'

To what extent do your interactions with PSRBs lead to enhancement in policy or practice?

Largely, respondents saw positive benefits to working with PSRBs, but it was noted that this tended to vary depending on the organisation in question. Some were seen as having 'poor contextual understanding', while others were 'exceptional'.

'The internal reflection on the process and outcomes of reporting to PSRBs frequently lead to updates, improvements and refinements to internal policies.'

'Some of the interactions are stimulating and have a positive impact. Some PSRBs are unclear and compliance against criteria that are more nebulous do not really foster enhancement.'

PSRBs offered additional objectives beyond Subject Benchmark Statements and influenced curricula positively. Managing accreditations also directly led to significant investment, and

good practices suggested by PSRBs were disseminated through monitoring activities. One provider used accreditation to reduce the burden of internal monitoring on departments through exemptions:

'We have whole faculties under which nearly all programmes have professional accreditation, and we must consider the implications on accreditation when developing education policy and processes. In some cases, this leads to exemptions due to accreditation, rather than the other way around.'

PSRB interactions informed annual course reports, action plans and academic quality handbooks, and aided development and improvement of internal policies.

However, one respondent was of the view that the focus of accreditation is on what is taught rather than how it is taught, and that some panel members lack pedagogic training and qualification. They saw this as potentially hindering pedagogic development. Another saw some value from PSRBs giving occasionally useful 'prods' to explore issues, but more often PSRBs were not keeping up with higher education developments so there was a need to persuade them of the benefits of innovations. Assessment was one area where traditional, rigid approaches were constraining institutional developments. Others simply saw no enhancements.

'Relationships with accrediting bodies vary widely, from proactive, developmental, collaborative relationships to ones where the accrediting body may be quite conservative in its requirements and less willing to consider change.'

Additional comments

In the additional comments section, some respondents noted that PSRB requirements were onerous, and could be labour-intensive while others noted a recent trend across PSRBs to become more 'light touch' in their monitoring, allowing providers to develop processes that ensured compliance.

Other respondents praised positive working relationships, although some suggested that communication could be variable.

'... discussion with accrediting bodies can, however, hold areas back from developing new approaches because accreditors are looking for consistency, replicability and familiarity across their discipline... shared dialogues across HEIs that constructively engage with accrediting bodies to support shifts towards new forms of teaching and assessment would be potentially helpful.'

'Communication with the PSRB's can also vary. Some are very good at liaising with institutions, others are less so.'

In talking to providers when sharing early findings from this survey, issues with communication were again foregrounded. Where providers have centralised the management of PSRB relationships, there are some bodies who prefer to correspond with a single named academic rather than the central quality team. This can mean not just duplication of effort, but it can also generate risks around less effective information cascades, and single points of failure - for instance, if the contact has to take a long-term sickness absence.

Duplication of scrutiny and reporting was noted, and one provider highlighted an issue with the HESA accrediting bodies list:

'The accuracy of information on the HESA accrediting bodies list is of utmost importance, to ensure that education providers are able to accurately and consistently publish information about the accreditation of their provision. Our engagement with professional bodies has highlighted that some are not aware of [the list] and how this translates into HE reporting requirements and public information.'

Finally, a comment was made about the importance of accurate information on the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) accrediting bodies list. This list helps to ensure that education providers are able to accurately and consistently publish information about the accreditation of their provision. One provider suggested that their engagement with professional bodies has highlighted that not all were aware of the HESA accrediting bodies list and how this translates into higher education reporting requirements and public information.

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