

4.4 Managing and maintaining quality in apprenticeship programmes

Apprenticeship programmes pose particular challenges in maintaining quality. They have a strong occupational focus which may, from time to time, require recalibration of outcomes and processes. This may require occupational scans, strong feedback and input from employers and those involved in the occupation.

They are employer-led which can lead to changing demand patterns. This might require continual input to ensure that new providers can maintain the quality of the programme. Any management system must take into account the position of the various providers and awarding agencies or institutions. There may be one employer or many. There may be one 'off-the-job' provider or many. The 'off-the-job' provider may be an awarding body. In all these cases, it is necessary that the management of the programme is not compromised by the complexity of the structure.

Incidentally, an employer or an entity created by a group of employers, which may not be providing any other programmes, may become a Coordinating Provider. This may require that quality responsibilities, normally carried out by extensive institutions with experienced staff, are carried out by a smaller group with less experience or resources. For example, to become a relevant provider, an entity would, among other things, need to take on the responsibilities outlined in *Quality Assurance Guidelines and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes leading to QQI Awards 2013*.

The responsibilities of the management and promotion of quality can be considered at three levels. These are, the broad context within which the programme is delivered, the strategic management of quality and, finally, the operational level that ensures that quality is delivered on a day-to-day basis. The management structure must be able to address all of these levels.

4.4.1 Producing a quality environment

Producing a quality environment will ensure that the standards of the programme and the interests of the stakeholders, the employers, the apprentices and the broader occupational group, are maintained. This can be achieved by having an efficient and effective organisational structure that can implement quality systems, react to external inputs and is transparent in its operations. It should also be a reflective structure capable of internal reform. Such an organisation would have the following characteristics:

- Clear assignment of roles and responsibilities, lines of communication and reporting supported by agreed memoranda of understanding, where necessary.
- Induction processes for new providers and support for new mentors, lecturers and managers.
- Promotion of a collegiate approach that recognises equality of esteem between different providers.

4.4.2 Strategic management of quality – ensuring continued relevance and increased quality

The strategic management of the quality assurance system involves the maintenance of that system. This, in turn, requires an ongoing evaluation as to whether the system is being implemented as established and to determine if elements need to be updated. The scope of possible changes should also be specified with clear boundaries, at establishment.

It requires active benchmarking of the programme against best practice elsewhere. It should have the ability to obtain timely reports on implementation and the ability to react to those reports.

Strategic management also requires continual assessment and re-assessment of the needs of the stakeholders and the evolution of the skills, knowledge and competences required within the occupation. This requires strong and rich connections with the community of practice and an awareness of changes elsewhere in the world. The structures necessary to carry out strategic management would have the following characteristics:

- Involvement of major stakeholders and providers meeting regularly with agreed terms of reference, agenda and minutes.
- Sufficient authority agreed by all providers to ensure compliance with QA systems.
- Sufficient internal competence and expertise to propose and if necessary implement changes to quality systems.
- Clear communication and reporting links with operational management.
- Be sufficiently embedded in the provision of the programme to act as an energising force rather than a purely controlling one.
- Should include members who have rich connections to or involvement with the occupation.
- Observe agreed processes to admit new providers to the organisation.
- Maintain open feedback processes from learners independently of the local employer.

4.4.3 Programme operation – implementing quality in a dynamic environment

The fragmented nature of the delivery process within apprenticeship programmes produces issues that must be dealt with by those involved with the direct delivery or management of the programme; these include the statutory regulator and the Coordinating Provider. Those involved with 'on-the-job' elements must be required to handle the individual recruitment and orientation of apprentices, ensure that the apprentice is functioning as a learner and as a valued member of the workforce, deal with external observations of the workplace experience, maintain records and liaise with 'off-the-job' management. They should also actively promote up-to-date techniques for inclusion in the programme.

The off-the-job provider must ensure that material delivered meets the needs of apprentices coming from work experiences which may be divergent. They may work in isolation requiring formal communication with peers. They may have to liaise with other off-the-job providers to ensure that elements delivered in different sites remain aligned.

Quality implementation will require providers to:

- have clear instructions as to their responsibilities and competence, and authority to carry them out.
- have an awareness of the whole programme and their position within it.
- have sufficient expertise to direct apprentices and to propose variations in the delivery process.

- have access to their peers and the opportunity to contribute to the evaluation and development of the programme.

4.4.4 Day-to-day management of the programme

4.4.4.1 Programme director/administrator

A programme director/administrator should be appointed by the Coordinating Provider to manage the programme, to administer or oversee the administration of the programme and to ensure communications with partners. The programme director is the point of contact for all providers for the programme. They organise the programme and examination boards. They report to the awarding body and to the Programme Board. They deal with individual apprentice issues. They assist employers in the registration of apprentices. They organise the registration of the apprentices with the awarding body. They assist in the admission of new members into the consortium. They are the contact point for apprentices with individual or group concerns.

4.4.4.2 The Programme Board functions

The Programme Board is the entity responsible for the ongoing oversight of the programme. It should have access to data on the delivery of the programmes, the current assessment results and the flow of apprentices between elements of the programme. It should receive all process reports from collaborating providers and from independent examiners. It should also be aware of changes in the circumstances of the collaborating providers and in the occupation. Its functions include:

- The general oversight of the delivery of the programme and of the assessments.
- Responding to inputs from external examiners.
- Responding to inputs from the providers and from the occupation.
- Sanctioning changes to delivery and minor changes to the programme within the bounds set by the validation.
- Organising surveys of apprentices and responding to these.
- Providing secure feedback mechanisms for apprentices.
- Reporting to the Coordinating Provider's academic council or equivalent on its activities, as required by the awarding body.
- Reporting on its activities to the partners as required.
- Taking the lead in the programmatic review in preparation for revalidation.
- In an expanded form it functions as an examination board.

4.4.4.3 *Membership of the Programme Board*

The size of Programme Boards may vary depending on the range of providers involved in the consortium and the distribution of sites at which the programme is delivered. It should consist of a minimum of four elements: the Programme Director, and representatives of employers of the educational/training providers and of apprentices. Representatives of other stakeholders such as occupational associations could be included where appropriate. The chair could be one of the employers and the organisation of the Programme Board should be the responsibility of the Programme Director.

- The Programme Director, besides organising the board, should act as a contact point for the Programme Board and the providers and should report to the consortium and the awarding body, if not a member.
- The members from the training/educational providers should function as experts rather than as representatives of their providers. At the same time, they should inform themselves of issues arising in their areas and be capable of arguing for changes in the programme.
- The members from the employers should be occupational experts and/or active mentors. They should be capable of representing the broad interests of the occupation. They should also have the capacity to bring provider concerns to the board.

4.4.4.4 *The examination board*

The size and membership of the examination board depends on the range of providers involved in the consortium and the distribution of sites at which the programme is delivered. It must be capable of dealing authoritatively with the assessment results presented to it. It should operate according to the rules of the awarding body. It should have available to it sufficient expertise to allow it to operate within those rules.

- It should have members drawn from the examiners, at least one from each educational/training provider and sufficient to deal with all modules and sites.
- Employers could be represented by their Programme Board members, with additional persons representing significant examining expertise, if necessary.
- External examiners, where they confirm results, should be members.
- The chairman of the Programme Board and the programme director should be members, ex-officio.