



PRODUCT LINES

Introduction

Academic Audit Associates Ltd (AAA) is a group of senior academic experts with long and intimate experience of higher education, its leadership, management, governance, and quality assurance. We bring to our clients the best of practice in academic audit and governance review based on our work across the UK and worldwide. Information about our Directors and Associates can be found at <http://www.academicaudit.net/who-we-are1.html>.

The Directors and Associates work together to serve clients that include universities, colleges, alternative providers and national agencies in the UK and overseas.

Unlike singleton consultants or smaller consultancies, AAA is able to undertake client commissions with pairs or teams of Directors and Associates when required. This enables us to provide services to all our clients at short notice (when needed) and in a timely way.

For each AAA project, methodologies and findings are subject to searching internal critical assessment and quality control before they are presented to the client. Our commitment to team-working also lends itself to work with fellow professionals in multidisciplinary teams.

The market for academic and other governance reviews

The Directors' own companies (Academic Quality Management Ltd and Quality Assurance Research for Higher Education Ltd) have provided advisory and review services to a range of clients within the UK and overseas higher education sectors since 2009. We anticipate that the demand for such services will be maintained at least at its present level and that AAA will operate in this market.

In December 2014, the Committee of University Chairs issued *The Higher Education Code of Governance* (the CUC Code). This applied initially to chartered universities or colleges, higher education corporations (HECs) and HECs operating through limited companies; it is now a key point of reference for all higher education providers, including alternative providers. The *Code* locates responsibility for periodically checking the effectiveness of the provider's arrangements for academic governance with governing bodies or their equivalents in alternative providers, usually their boards of directors.

For some time and as part of 'HEFCE Assurance Review' and its equivalents in the other countries within the UK, there have been external checks on the 'Financial management sustainability and governance' (FSMG) of providers. As the *Revised operating model* (ROM) is now rolled out by HEFCE, FSMG checks will continue with greater emphasis on the soundness of governance overall and the reliability of the assurances that governing bodies seek about the soundness of academic governance. The ROM treats compliance with the CUC Code by higher education providers as the norm.¹

We anticipate that the interest of governing bodies in academic governance will sharply increase in the near future as awareness grows of the requirements of the ROM.

¹ http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2016/201603/HEFCE2016_03.pdf



The recently published White Paper and the Higher Education and Research Bill identify several distinct 'gateways' through which a higher education provider might pass: initial entry to the sector as a 'registered' provider; acquisition of one of two forms of 'approved' provider status;² and the scrutiny of a provider seeking taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) or research degree awarding powers (RDAP).³ Given the experience and expertise of its members in supporting applicants for awarding powers, AAA is well placed to exploit what is likely to be a substantial demand from providers seeking advice and support as they seek to pass through these gateways and/or awarding powers.

The product lines

The following outline of our product lines is selective and focuses on various forms of review activity. Our additional product lines (which are not illustrated here) include the provision of a range of development and support services for providers and for national agencies.

Line 1. Reviews commissioned by governing bodies focusing on the operation of academic governance in the context of overall arrangements for governance and management.

Explanation

Since the publication of the CUC Code, many providers have commissioned independent external reviews of their overall governance. We anticipate that there will be a sharp increase in the demand from governing bodies for governance reviews in the next two years and a steady demand for periodic reviews of governance thereafter.

We see this particular Line as enabling a governing body to demonstrate to stakeholders (including HEFCE) how it assures itself of the soundness of a provider's academic governance.

Line 2. Forensic reviews undertaken at short notice of a client's governance arrangements in order to deal with a particular difficulty.

Explanation

In this instance the client is likely to be the governing body of a provider, members of which believe they have reason to doubt the soundness of its arrangements for academic governance. They require an independent review to be undertaken to establish the facts of the matter. In such circumstances there may be limited cooperation by the executive: for example, in providing digital resources. This would require the consultants to spend more time on-site gathering information and evidence, undertaking interviews, with consultants working in pairs, and for notes of interviews to be available subsequently (for example, in the event of litigation or to deal with a 'concerns' or 'unsatisfactory quality' enquiry).

Line 3. Governing body training on the conduct of academic and financial risk assessments.

Explanation

HEFCE thinks it likely that governing bodies 'will wish to identify and consider the full profile

² Success as a Knowledge Economy, pp.24-5, Box 1.1

³ Op.cit., p.29, Box 1.2



of academic risk'. The examples it has given have been in such areas as international or other collaborative partnerships, students studying at a distance, or in new areas of learning and teaching activity.⁴ HEFCE has acknowledged that governing bodies will need 'development and support' in discharging this and their other responsibilities.

AAA is ready to offer training and support for governing bodies to enable them to undertake and interpret academic risk assessments.

Line 4. Review of the soundness of a client's arrangements for handling the initiation, management and closure of partnerships with other higher education providers/institutions within the UK and overseas.

Explanation

Since various well-reported mishaps with higher education partnerships since the 1990s, the provision of higher education with other providers – whether in the UK or overseas – has been recognised as carrying risks that need to be identified and carefully managed.

The *CUC Code* and the *Revised operating model* each assume that governing bodies will want to be assured that the 'full profile of academic risks' faced by the provider is being properly assessed and managed and the scope of the *Revised operating model* extends to all collaborations including 'international activities'. We therefore anticipate that where higher education is provided with or through others, governing bodies will want to assure themselves through an independent external review that the policies and approaches the provider has adopted are sound and that collaborations are soundly managed, in order to safeguard the academic experience of students, the standards of awards and the senior provider's reputation.

Line 5. An urgent forensic enquiry into concerns about the condition of a particular partnership to establish the facts and make recommendations

Explanation

In the past, AAA's Directors and Associates have undertaken such enquiries when a client university or other provider has learned from internal sources, students or the media that there may have been lapses in the academic experience provided to students by one of its partners and has needed to establish the facts.

In such cases it is established practice to retain independent consultants to undertake an urgent fact-finding mission and report their findings (with or without recommendations). AAA has the capacity to undertake enquiries swiftly and thoroughly, whether in the UK or further afield, with the necessary degree of rigour and report to the client.

Taking such action enables executive and/or governing body of a university or other provider to be seen to have acted decisively to safeguard the academic interests of students and their own reputation. Similar action to engage one or more consultants as 'trouble-shooters' may also follow when concerns (not limited to collaborations) are raised by students, staff or third parties about a university or other provider.

⁴ Procurement of Quality Assessment Services (2016). *Schedule 3: Specification and Technical Requirements*, p.14.



Line 5. Due diligence enquiries into potential partners

Explanation

The Directors and Associates have previously been called on to help clients to remedy weaknesses in partnership arrangements that could be traced back to due diligence enquiries that had been poorly undertaken (or completely omitted). From 2012, when QAA began to emphasise the importance for sound partnerships of properly conducted due diligence (particularly for transnational higher education) more institutions have begun to use professional services providers to assess the academic, financial and legal standing of potential partners.

This product line comprises forensic reviews of the academic status of potential partners but there are also opportunities for AAA and other providers of professional services to work together to provide a comprehensive due diligence service for clients who require due diligence reports undertaken with best efforts to a high standard.

Line 6. Preliminary assessment for providers entering the five gateways mapped out by the White Paper or otherwise seeking degree awarding powers.

Explanation

The Directors and Associates have extensive experience of advising clients on their readiness to submit an application for Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs). AAA offers assessments and advice to clients seeking initial registration and approved status as providers, to established providers seeking taught and research DAPs.

In all cases, AAA provides a comprehensive report to the client covering academic governance, academic and curriculum management. Under the more recent proposals described in the 2016 White Paper, reports to new providers will, where appropriate, provide an independent assessment of the provider against the published criteria for passage through the relevant gateway.

In the new circumstances that the enactment of the Higher Education and Research Bill will create we foresee opportunities for AAA and other professional services providers to work together to offer comprehensive support and guidance to providers seeking to pass through these gateways and gain DAPs.

Line 7. Academic, governance and management development and support for new providers.

Explanation

Many alternative providers, particularly new entrants and those seeking registered or approved status, will be seeking development support from external consultants. This support is likely to take a variety of forms and will include the development of:

- Committee structures
- Academic regulations, policies and procedures
- Quality assurance arrangements



and staff development in a range of areas, including academic leadership and management and academic practice in teaching, learning and assessment.

Projects of this kind range from specifically focused and short term engagements and cases where the client is, in effect, using the consultants to help it to recruit, induct, train and support non-executive members of its governing body, its executive, academic managers and/or registry staff, and provide support for curriculum design, learning and teaching development and student representation.

As with other Lines, there are likely to be opportunities for AAA and other providers of professional services to work together to extend the range of services on offer to clients.

Please note

For the purposes of these illustrations it is assumed that

- the project and the grounds for undertaking it have been formally stated by the client
- the client's records and those of any associated providers are in good order; are for the most part held digitally; are accessible remotely; and that there has been prior agreement that the contractor will be granted access to the information it can show to be necessary to complete the commission
- the client wishes any review or development project to be conducted thoroughly and, insofar as is possible, without intruding into their day-to-day working; for reviews and forensic audits, that as much as possible of the work is undertaken by the contractor off-site; and that any meetings that are required to complete the review are kept to a minimum, consistent with thoroughness and the client's directions
- governance and other reviews are conducted with best efforts, findings are fully evidenced and reported such that they can support litigation where necessary ('forensic reviews'); where the object of the review is not solely to establish the facts, the outcome of the review is the delivery of a clear, authoritative report to the client with recommendations
- for the duration of the contract, the client assigns a senior academic manager or professional to liaise between the AAA team and the client's staff and students. The client will also assign an experienced administrator to facilitate contacts, meetings and access to digital and other sources of information and data.

Indicative costings are available on request.

Dr D Cairns & Prof C Raban

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