Education and Training Committee – 8 September 2011

Visitors' reports - commendations

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Introduction
At the Committee meeting on 9 June 2011, members questioned the value and message associated with including commendations in visitors' reports from approval visits. It was agreed that the Executive would provide Committee with a summary and review of the use of commendations to date, so that Committee could make an informed decision about their future role in visitors' reports.

This paper provides the background into the use of visitors' reports and commendations and summarises the feedback received recently from key stakeholders (namely education providers, visitors, ETP members and executive officers involved in approval visits). The paper then outlines a number of recommendations regarding the future use of commendations, both in the short and longer term.

Brief history

The original visitors' report for approval visits was agreed by the Approvals Committee in May 2004 and used for three academic years. In December 2007, the Education and Training Committee reviewed the use of commendations in visitors' reports from approval visits and tightened up the rationale behind and use of commendations. The decisions were made to help align the HPC approval process with the wider quality assurance framework used in higher education (i.e. similar terminology and decisions to internal reviews and (re)validations) and also to strengthen the dissemination of good practice. Commendations were defined as 'observations of innovative best practice by a programme or education provider'. Visitors' reports were required to include a clear description of the particular aspect that the visitors wished to commend, along with a clear explanation of why the particular aspect was innovative and best practice and what and how other education providers could learn from it. It was noted that as commendations were included in visitors' reports from approval visits, they could be viewed online. In a further step to encourage dissemination, it was agreed that an analysis of commendations and publication of trends would be included in annual reports.

Data

In the last three annual reports (2008 – 2010), there has been an analysis of commendations and an attempt to identify trends. As the tables below show there has been an insignificant and declining number of commendations over the three year period. Over the last three years, there has been no consistent area of commendation emerging or trends based around professions or reasons for visits.

Table 1

	Academic year		
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Number of commendations	63	43	17
Number of visits	38	37	53
Number of programmes considered	84	92	111
Average number of commendations per visit	1.8	1.2	0.3
Average number of commendations per programme considered	0.8	0.5	0.01

Table 2

Area of commendation	Academic year		
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Student support	12	6	0
Physical resources	6	7	7
Curriculum design	14	9	3
Research opportunities or quality	1	6	0
Practice placement co-ordination	13	5	0
Learning and teaching approaches	17	10	7

Observations

As the executive, visitors and Education & Training Panel (ETP) members have implemented the above-mentioned definitions and visitors report format, it has become increasing difficult to agree and justify commendations which both reflect innovative best practice and can be effectively shared.

Education providers have questioned (both informally with the executive and formally via observations to ETP) the rationale of the HPC's policy on commendations. Many feel that only giving commendations in exceptional circumstances had the potential to cause resentment, particularly when compared to other reviewing bodies. Informal feedback from education providers suggests that there is a general impression amongst them that the HPC do not give commendations.

Concern has also been raised that commendations are subjective. Unlike conditions and recommendations, commendations are not linked to the standards of education and training and without such a benchmark there is a risk of bias as well as inconsistency. Differences in opinion between visitors, the executive and/or ETP members over what constitutes innovative best practice and effective dissemination often occur.

Most stakeholders are clear about the HPC's decision making and reporting mechanisms and commendations occasionally seem to blur this picture as they do not link explicitly to our standards or public protection. Our focus on threshold standards and quality assurance is skewed slightly with commendations as they

offer comment and opinion more akin to quality enhancement. On a practical note, there is always the possibility that commendations sit alongside conditions and recommendations in a visitors' report, either contradicting or overshadowing the general spirit of the report and overall recommended outcome on the programme's approval.

Informal feedback from education providers, the executive and visitors suggests that the current process of publicising commendations in visitors' reports and their analysis in annual reports is not an effective means of dissemination. As the HPC do not prescribe a particular model of education and training, there is great variety in the types of approved programmes, both within and between professions. This raises the question of how valuable and transferable aspects of innovative best practice actually are to the wider field. There is also the potential for education providers to perceive identified innovative best practice as advocating a particular model of education and training.

Summary
The approach that HPC takes to its programme approval process needs to be designed to balance public protection with the wider higher education quality assurance and enhancement framework within which it normally operates. The Committee has worked hard to date to ensure that, so far as possible, the principles of its programme approval process sits alongside existing and complementary demands on education providers. It has always been the Committee's intention to ensure that HPC do not duplicate demands where other bodies are already and/or better placed to address certain issues.

It is clear that HPC already has a range of processes in place which can be described as quality assurance mechanisms. Its interaction and concern with quality enhancement is less clear. Further work is needed to analyse and direct the HPC in this area, including untangling whether it is quality enhancement or more communication around quality assurance that is appropriate. There is scope for the HPC to play a more active role in disseminating different ways of meeting threshold standards if education providers would find this useful.

Decision
The Committee is asked to agree the following;

- Commendations should be removed from visitors' reports, with effect from today (i.e. ahead of 2011-12 academic year);
- Recommendations should remain in visitors' reports;
- The analysis of commendations should not be included in the 2011 Annual Report (covering the 2010-2011 academic year);
- The decision to remove commendations should be communicated to education providers and stakeholders, via Education Update (October 2011 edition); and
- The themes of identifying and disseminating good practice and identifying and disseminating different ways to meet threshold standards should be

carried over into future discussions around the HPC's approach to quality enhancement and work plans for 2012-13 and beyond.

Background information
Approvals Committee – 24 May 2004
Education and Training Committee – 4 December 2007
Education and Training Committee –June 2011
Annual reports 2008, 2009 & 2010.

Resource implications
None

Financial implications
None

Appendices
None

Date of paper
24 August 2011