

# What systems are in place to maintain quality in pharmacy degree courses?

Following allegations that underperforming students were allowed to progress, the school of pharmacy at De Montfort University remains on probation for a further year (p555). Dawn Connelly finds out what processes are involved in ensuring the quality of pharmacy degree courses is maintained

In some people's minds the quality of all pharmacy degree courses was called into question when the *Times Higher Education Supplement* published a story on the school of pharmacy at De Montfort University, which revealed that underperforming students had been allowed to progress despite concern from staff and external examiners (*PJ*, 29 April, p493).

There are, in fact, a number of mechanisms in place to maintain the quality of pharmacy degree courses provided by universities in the UK. These mechanisms encompass the universities' own standards, including the appointment of various boards and external examiners, accreditation by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Together, these systems aim to secure appropriate comprehensive standards to ensure pharmacy graduates are prepared for preregistration training.

## The Society's role

The Society's accreditation process varies for new and existing schools. Existing schools are visited by a team of the Society's accreditors at least every five years whereas new schools are subject to a seven-year process (see Panel).

Damian Day is head of accreditation at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and is responsible for the overall process. "We can, and do, visit more often if issues come to light or if, for example, we know that something major is happening, such as the university is moving. So, if there is anything that we know might



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impact on the length of accreditation then we can visit earlier."

The accreditation team is compiled from a panel of experts and consists of a team leader (who is a senior pharmacist), at least one pharmacy academic, one pharmacist from each of the hospital, community and industrial sectors and one lay member. Accreditation visits take two days and schools are judged against 101 criteria, all of which must be met (see Panel).

Mr Day explains that universities are contacted one year ahead of a visit so that they have time to prepare. First, the university has to demonstrate in documents how it believes it has met each of the assessment criteria. Then the accreditation team visits the university and talks to a cross section of staff and students to verify the university's claims.

"The visiting team talks to every level of staff from vice-chancellor down to technicians in the laboratories. We also see students," explains Mr Day.

A report is then compiled and this is considered at a meeting of the Society's education committee, which exercises the Society's statutory education powers.

## Sanctions

Mr Day says that the committee can recommend one of three courses of action. It can accredit the course for a maximum of five years

— this is usually subject to conditions that should be met before the next academic year starts. The committee can place the university on probation — in order to do that there must be evidence that one or more criteria will not be met. Or, in extreme circumstances, accreditation can be withdrawn or denied.

"The strength of the accreditation system is that it is a strictly criteria-based process. This is what makes it robust," says Mr Day. He emphasises that the process is entirely objective. "There are criteria which are either met or are not met and, if they are not met, then we step in."

Over the past 10 years, the Society has placed three universities on probation. "One university nearly had its accreditation withdrawn several years ago because the Society was so concerned about its resource levels. But in the end the university complied," says Mr Day. Another university was placed on probation for one year and one university — De Montfort — is currently on probation.

If a university is put on probation, the Society specifies certain conditions that it must meet and by when it must meet them, in order to have its probation rescinded, explains Mr Day. "There is a process of following up on what we required [them to do]. We check that they have complied in the timescale that we required of them." He adds that the Society always reserves the right to enquire should any issue arise but that issue must make one of the criteria vulnerable, ie, it will not be met. The criteria are wide ranging and cover every aspect of the course, including what is taught, academic standards, staffing levels and financial issues.

"If you look at it as a process it is equivalent to that of other health care regulators. We have benchmarked it widely and it is certainly among the best there is around," says Mr Day. He stresses that the Society exercises the full range of sanctions when necessary. "In the past year we have accredited [some] universities for a full five years, [others] for less than five years and in one case for only one year." Examples of issues that may lead to a university being placed on probation include a drop in staffing levels, a drop in finance or a complaint from the external examiners about academic standards.

## External examiners

Sandy Florence, former dean at the School of Pharmacy, University of London, explains that it is part of the professional activity of an academic institution to ensure

## Accreditation of new courses

Accreditation of new courses begins three years before the school plans to accept students. First an enquiry is lodged with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. This is followed two years before the course is due to start by an accreditation visit by the Society to assess the university's business plan. One year before the course begins the Society visits to assess the curriculum.

The school is then visited every year for each of the first four years that the MPharm is delivered so that a cohort of undergraduates can be followed from enrolment to graduation.

Subsequently the new school is treated as an existing school and is visited at least every five years.

that the highest standards are achieved. "The university degree is a science degree regardless of the Society's accreditation. So there is an absolute responsibility on the university to ensure that standards are maintained." He adds: "What is often more difficult is to decide what to put in the curriculum. But once that is decided, and there is uniformity of view on that, then standards are maintained."

All schools of pharmacy appoint external examiners from existing schools of pharmacy. These examiners offer an independent opinion on the curriculum, examination papers and individual students. "They are made aware of the nature of the syllabus and the curriculum, they look at draft examination papers to see whether they appear to be of the right standard and check if there are inconsistencies," says Professor Florence.

The external examiners review the examination papers, check the range of marks and see if there are difficulties with particular questions or papers. "A crucial role is in looking at those borderline students, by conducting a viva or looking again at their papers to confirm whether they should fail or pass, or pass with a warning," explains Professor Florence.

### Academic boards

Universities also appoint academic boards to monitor the quality of courses. Gavin Brooks, head of school at the University of Reading, explains that there is a hierarchical board structure at Reading university. The structure starts at modular level with each module having a co-ordinator who is responsible for determining the quality and content of the module. At a programme level there is a board of studies, which meets once a term and reviews how well different modules have performed against prespecified indicators. The next level up is the faculty board for teaching and learning, which in turn reports to the university board for teaching and learning.

At Reading the pharmacy board of studies is chaired by the director of teaching and learning and comprises the head of school, directors of each discipline, an academic member of staff from another department within the university and an external person from Royal Berkshire Hospital. The school also has an examination board, which meets to review examination results and decide which students must resit and which must be asked to leave the course. External examiners attend examination board meetings and all members of staff are also encouraged to attend.

Professor Florence explains that if there are extenuating circumstances for particular students then the examination board meeting is where they would be raised. "There are rules in each university as to the extent to which the marks of an individual can be moved because of illness and other problems. Under normal circumstances marks below 35 or 37 per cent are not considered for compensation," says Professor Florence. He ex-

plains that compensation can be applied when someone obtains, for example, 60 per cent in three modules and 38 per cent in one module. "Compensation is something I was never happy with. I believe that prowess in pharmacology should not make up for lack of prowess in pharmaceuticals," he says.

### QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 1997 to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education. It carries out institutional audits of universities and other establishments every six years. It also publishes a code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (available at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)).

Until this year the agency also conducted subject reviews, which were similar to accreditation visits. However, since 2001 a slimmer version of subject reviews, involving a half-day assessment visit, has been in operation and from the next academic year (2006–07), the agency will no longer be conducting these reviews. Mr Day comments: "The crucial difference between the Quality Assurance Agency and the Society is that the QAA looks at university processes and we look at the course itself. The Society's accreditation visits now offer the only sustained look at the MPharm course."

### Holistic approach

Professor Florence believes that an accreditation system, like that provided by the Society, is needed to ensure that there is some commonality between courses. However, he believes that the accreditation visits generally look at systems and he would like to see more debate about the nature of what is taught and how it is taught. "[Accreditation] is a system we need but it does not ensure uniformity. In my opinion, there is not enough comparative data used."

Professor Florence also believes that there is a tendency not to look at the school as a whole. "The visits often look at the teaching element, whereas if the school or department has a high financial turnover and large research cohorts, then this brings a lot of expertise into the school, which filters down to the undergraduate curriculum. This is not really consid-

ered." A more holistic view of institutions needs to be developed, he adds. He suggests that questions that need to be asked include: has the school got a good research base? Is the income base right? Has the head of the school got control over the finances to the extent that he or she is not dependent on the wider faculty within which the school sits?

Professor Brooks believes that having the Society's accreditation system ensures that the quality of pharmacy courses is as high as it should be. "It is also a useful mechanism for reminding and aiding the powers that be that certain things have to be adhered to," he adds.

### Research

Mr Day argues that although universities are mapped against their own claims and the Society's criteria, the Society does have an appreciation of the wider sector: "We survey the universities every year to look at things like finance and staffing." He adds that the Society also conducts research into things like the academic workforce, projected increases in student numbers and how that might affect preregistration placements and workforce opportunities, and emerging trends in schools and research. "I would argue that we do more research into education than most equivalent health care regulators," he says.

The Society is currently conducting a full pharmacy education review programme called "Fit for the future". It encompasses a review of the MPharm, preregistration training, postregistration training and continuing professional development.

The review coincides with the Government's consultation on the draft Pharmacists and Pharmaceutical Technicians Order, under Section 60 of the Health Act 1999, which is likely to give extra statutory powers to the Society relating to CPD.

### Checks and balances

Professor Florence believes that there are enough checks and balances within established schools that major problems should not happen. "There should be enough warning signals from the director of undergraduate studies, the head of department and the academic board to alert the dean to a problem before an accreditation visit takes place," he concludes.

## 101 conditions must be met to gain Society accreditation

There are 50 degree accreditation criteria, which include prerequisite criteria that are requirements of the EU, a single criterion relating to degree course entry requirements (that entrants must have achieved GCSE at grades A to C, or equivalent qualifications, in English language and mathematics) and criteria organised as required outcomes, required processes and required structures.

The criteria cover graduate attributes, processes relating to the student (such as gaining experience of practice) and to the degree course (such as students being taught alongside other health care professionals) and structures (such as the school having appropriately expert academic staff).

The remaining 51 items are in the form of the indicative syllabus for UK pharmacy degree courses. The syllabus covers the patient, drug action, the drug substance and the medicinal product, health care systems and the role of professionals, and how health care and pharmacy operates in the wider world.

"Accreditation of UK pharmacy degree courses" lists all criteria in detail and is available via the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's website at [www.rpsgb.org](http://www.rpsgb.org)