

Case Study: Quality Assurance Agency for HE

How Labour Market Insight is Playing a Part in Helping Them Achieve Their Vision

QAA's ambitious vision

As the organisation with responsibility for monitoring and advising on standards and quality in UK Higher Education and Access to HE Diplomas, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has a vision of seeing a system of “world leading and independently assured higher education”. In 2017, it set out its strategy for achieving this – *Building on World-Class Quality* – which included the following core values: collaboration, innovation, expertise, accountability, and integrity. In addition, the strategy set out the following three aims:

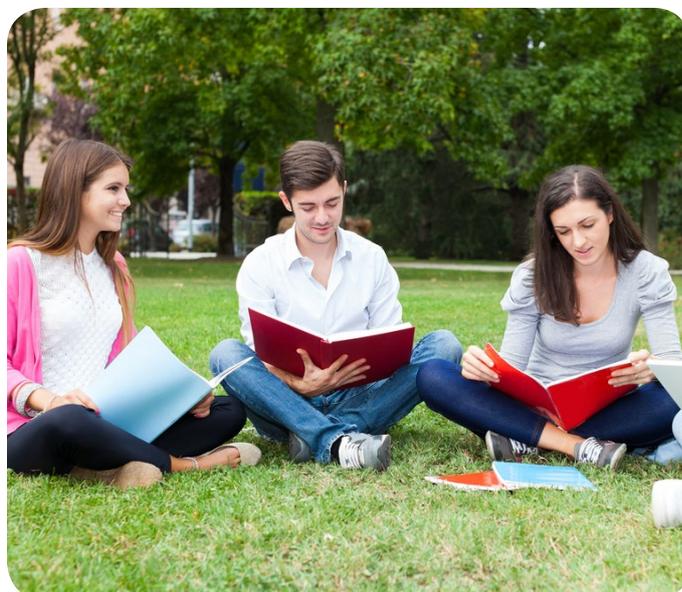
- **To be the expert independent quality body supporting a diverse system of co-regulation of UK Higher Education.**
- **To deliver valued services that provide assurance and drive quality enhancement.**
- **To use their international reputation and partnerships to benefit UK Higher Education.**

An ambitious vision requires innovative solutions

To achieve its vision, QAA needs to be at the forefront of responding to issues affecting the Higher Education sector, and one that has gained prominence in recent years is the general lack of connectivity between course areas and employer demand. That this has become an issue is down to a number of pressure points: employers are complaining that they are not seeing people with the right skills coming through their doors; students are now emerging with large debts from their studies, and so need assurance that the course they are doing will lead to good employment outcomes; and the Government, alarmed at the nation's slow growth and low productivity, is increasingly urging universities to rise to the challenge of working more closely with employers to match the skills that are being taught with the skills that are needed.

QAA recognises that this lack of connectivity between Higher Education and employment demand is a problem that the sector needs to address urgently, with innovative solutions. One solution the organisation has recently embraced is partnering with Emsi to bring in Labour Market Insight (LMI), in order to get a better understand the skills needs of industry, and so help close the gap between Higher Education skills supply and graduate job demand. QAA is hoping to use LMI in the following areas:

- **Effective management of the QAA recognition scheme for Access to HE.**
- **Building relationships.**
- **Developing services.**
- **Increasing their voice.**



Effective management of the QAA recognition scheme for Access to HE

The Access to Higher Education (HE) Diploma prepares students for study at degree level, with the majority being delivered in Further Education colleges. As part of its role in maintaining and managing the recognition scheme for these qualifications, QAA not only licences and reviews the Access Validating Agencies (AVA), but is also engaged in actively supporting them and providers to improve their practice. Where LMI comes in - particularly localised LMI - is in helping AVAs to consider particular skills gaps and local community needs when validating new programmes. The point is to ensure that the courses and skills being taught align to the needs of regional employers, so that the career progression opportunities of those enrolled in these courses are significantly increased.

Building Relationships

As well supporting AVAs in the development of new course areas, QAA has also identified a role for LMI in the engagement that sits around the qualifications. For instance, as well as working with students, AVA's, providers, and employers to promote Access to HE provision, the organisation is also promoting it in a number of specific areas such as prisons and the armed forces. With all these stakeholders, the intention is to use Emsi data to provide them with good insight about their local labour markets, which will in turn help them in the development and marketing of these courses to their cohort.



Developing services

The flip side of ensuring that courses are better aligned with employer demand is to show students the sorts of career pathways that could open up to them after graduation. To help facilitate this, QAA has been hoping to develop a digital graduate career planning tool for adult Access to HE learners, including an integrated career search tool. By partnering with Emsi, this goal is set to become a reality through an API, which allows education providers to seamlessly integrate regional LMI into their website, and connect it directly back to courses. This will give QAA a powerful and compelling way to empower people to make good career decisions, by offering them both solid regional careers insight – including occupation demand, salary expectations, and transferable skills – and linking this back to related courses to show how a particular course can set them on a particular career pathway.

Increasing their voice

One of QAA's priorities is to provide focused and relevant content to stakeholders, which it does through its website and social media, with plans to also add a programme of webinars. Alongside other tools and the organisation's own research, the intention is to use Emsi data in these communications, to engage stakeholders with robust and reliable information about demand for skills in their labour market.

According to Julie Mizon, QAA's Access Manager, at a time when UK Higher Education is really coming under pressure to find solutions to the lack of connectivity between education and industry, the partnership with Emsi promises to be an exciting one:

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Employers, students and government have all been demanding more from universities in terms of ensuring that the education they provide leads to good employment outcomes. We really believe that the kind of regional data offered by Emsi can play a big part in meeting this challenge, and so we are really excited about the many ways QAA can use it to achieve our vision.

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