3 December 2014

Strategy and Policy Board

To consider

External input into our research programme

Issue

1. The way in which we currently generate our research programme has a number of gaps which we would like to fill. Specifically they include ensuring sufficient external input into our research programme, generating appropriate strategic, cross-directorate, research and maximising the external impact of our programme.

Recommendation

2. The Strategy and Policy Board is asked to agree that we develop a strand of our research programme which will operate through a call for expressions of interest to be launched at the GMC Conference in 2015.
External input into our research programme

Issue

3 As we have developed the GMC research function over recent years, we have used different approaches to ensure that our research programme delivers high quality outputs that meet our operational and strategic needs. Notably, between 2006 and 2010 we entered into a collaborative arrangement with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The research resulting from this collaboration was recognised to be high-quality, independent and therefore credible, and served to raise the GMC’s profile. However, there was a perception on the part of some that parts of the research produced were insufficiently closely aligned with our regulatory priorities and, related to this, that this approach resulted in the GMC having inadequate control over the direction of a research programme we were funding.

4 Since the end of the relationship with the ESRC, we have put in place clear and robust internal processes for developing, managing and governing our research programme. Further, when tendering for research we clearly specify the scope of any given project to ensure this meets our requirements - specifying the research questions we want answered and the research methods that we expect researchers to use when addressing these and then closely managing the commissioned research throughout the research process. The resulting research projects that form our current and recent programme are clearly orientated towards our operational needs and policy priorities.

5 However, and whilst recognising that much of our research programme should continue to be generated in the way it currently is, our approach has resulted in a process and programme that leaves room for improvement. Firstly there are few projects that are generated with the intention of shaping our medium, or medium to long term, strategic thinking, as most have tended to relate to problems within particular functional areas of our business. We do intend at least in part to address this by looking to generate such projects from within the Intelligence Unit but there is scope to do more on top.

6 Secondly, we do not currently have any external input into our research programme. This means that our research priorities are shaped primarily by what are identified as problems or issues from our organisational perspective. The research community are only invited to engage with us in response to an issue when we have identified a question that needs answered and have specified how it should be answered. This runs the risk of missing important things on the horizon that require research to put us on the front foot as our external operating environment changes.

7 Thirdly, our current research programme doesn’t have the external profile and - potentially - impact commensurate with the resources we put into it.
Developing our thinking, stimulating ideas and asking for proposals

8 An approach which would help us to address these gaps, introduce some flexibility and encourage innovation and fresh thinking would be to develop a strand of our research programme that funds research through a regular call for expressions of interest, leading, where appropriate, to a call for proposals. In this approach, which is used by many high profile bodies such as the Wellcome Trust, we would identify an area, or areas, where we are interested in funding research. This would operate in two stages.

9 In Stage 1 we would ask for brief expressions of interest on a two page pro-forma in relation to the research questions/theme(s) we had identified ourselves.

10 In Stage 2, these expressions of interest, which would set out the researchers broad ideas in response to our call, would then be shortlisted, and those researchers that had been shortlisted would be invited to submit a more developed proposal for our further consideration.

11 We recommended that the GMC should develop such a research strand. A budget range – and we would initially propose a band of £60,000-£80,000 - would be set and it would be made clear that any proposals would need to relate to our specific functions or general regulatory roles. Further, while we would expect that this two stage process would lead to high-quality proposals, we would reserve the right not to fund any proposal if, to give some examples, they were not of the required quality, hadn’t set out a realistic research plan within the given budget or replicated other research taking place.

12 It is important that we develop our governance systems for this research strand and the increasing number of external research and data requests we now receive. We will be making specific proposals for this early in the New Year.

13 We propose launching this research strand through a workshop at the GMC conference in March 2015. This would also provide an opportunity for some external input into the themes that we are proposing to use for this call for proposals. The call for proposals would then be launched in April or May 2015, providing time for academics to engage before the summer. The initial intention would be to run this on an annual basis.

14 Any research that was commissioned as a result of this procedure would, once commissioned, be managed through our standard research procedure. So, for example, there would be a contract in place, regular progress meetings, a specified output being delivered and quality assurance of that output.

15 We anticipate that such a research strand would have a number of potential benefits to the GMC. These would include:
Raising our external profile and engagement with the research community. We are not aware of a call for proposals of a similar scale that exists for researchers that are based within Medical Education, so this has the potential to be high profile and to receive significant engagement.

Providing external input into our research programme but without this being at the expense of our decision making, governance and management. External input could help us to identify issues and potential solutions that we might not identify/investigate from our organisational perspective but without the risks of perceptions of conflict of interest because the external input would be advisory only.

Providing the opportunity for research proposals that could help to influence our medium term strategic thinking. Highlighting one or more themes that relate to strategic issues that we are grappling with could result in research proposals that could help to inform us in this respect.

At an initial discussion at the Research Policy Forum meeting in September 2014, this approach was agreed, but with the understanding that it would be presented to the Strategy and Policy Board for further discussion. At the Forum meeting a number of potential themes were also identified in respect of which we might invite expressions of interest:

The way individual performance interacts with organisational performance.

How we assess qualitative data regarding risk.

How and why demographic characteristics relate to progression in medical education/career.

How we assess the impact of regulatory levers/interventions and establish what is effective in this respect: e.g. our standards work; inspection and assessment.

How we assess insight.

What the right frequency and nature of communication is for our audience.

How we can assess the effectiveness of educational interventions for specific areas of practice - for instance a longitudinal study looking at how palliative care is taught.
Supporting information

How this issue relates to the corporate strategy and business plan
17 The GMC research programme potentially relates to all strategic aims of the Corporate Strategy, depending on the topics of research projects, but in particular relates to strategic aim 5: it is inkeeping with our commitment to evaluate the impact of what we do and demonstrate the difference we make.

How the action will be evaluated
18 We will consider how many proposals we receive through this call, the quality of the proposals received, the extent to which they differ from our current research programme and the extent to which the development and running of the call for proposals has led to an increase in the overall profile of our research programme.

What engagement approach has been used to inform the work (and what further communication and engagement is needed)
19 How to increase the external impact of our research programme has been a topic of conversation at a number of Research Policy Forums during the last year. The call for proposals was recommended to the September 2014 meeting of the Research Policy Forum, where it was endorsed subject to further discussion at the Strategy and Policy Board. We plan to launch the call for proposals at our 2015 Conference, with this conference being an opportunity for external input into the themes we are intending on using for the call for proposals.

What equality and diversity considerations relate to this issue
20 The themes currently proposed for this research strand by the Research Policy Forum include one focusing how and why demographic characteristics relate to progression in medical education/career. More generally this is a research strand that could bring new perspectives to our work around equality and diversity.

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