

UK-wide Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the second meeting, held on Friday 20 January 2017 at HEFCE Office, Finlaison House, London

In attendance

Members:

Professor Andrew Wathey (Chair, Northumbria University)
Gordon Ashworth (CMA)
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Dr Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Alison Cook (SFC)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Will Hammonds (JUK)
Celia Hunt (HEFCW)
Professor David Jones (Queen's University Belfast)
Susan Lapworth (HEFCE)
Professor Lorna Milne (University of St Andrews)
Jon Reynard (Arts University Bournemouth)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Arti Saraswat (AOC)
Claire Thompson (Department for the Economy, NI)
Sorana Vieru (NUS)
Alison Wheaton (GSM London)

Apologies

Professor Andy Westwood (University of Manchester, University of Winchester, University of Wolverhampton)

HEFCE Officers:

Scott Court, Head of Quality (Secretary)
Jess Bacon (Clerk)
Jack Thompson (Clerk)

Item 1 Chair's welcome and apologies

1. The Chair welcomed members, noting special welcome to Professor David Jones on his first meeting of the Committee. Apologies were given for Professor Andy Westwood. Members were asked to identify any conflicts of interest in the upcoming agenda items. The Committee noted John Rushforth's role in the project board of the LFHE programme of work and Douglas Blackstock's interest in QAA matters.

Item 2 Minutes from the last meeting and matters arising

2. Minutes from the last meeting were agreed as an accurate record subject to the following changes:
 - Bethan Dudas should be removed from the attendance list
 - the description of the Committee as “co-owned by the sector” should be expanded to “co-owned by the sector and funding bodies”.
3. Scott Court reported that all HEFCE actions had either been completed or were in progress. Discussions with HEFCE’s communications team were underway to take forward the production of a visual map of the new quality arrangements. An action had been noted for Committee members to contact HEFCE with expressions of interest for ongoing engagement with project teams; one expression of interest had been received. Mechanisms for the Committee to work more closely with project teams were to be discussed further in a subsequent agenda item.
4. Members noted an action in the previous meeting’s minutes to include a funder’s update from each nation as a standing agenda item for the Committee. This had not been added to the agenda for the January meeting but would be included in future.

ACTION: Secretariat to add funders’ update as an agenda item for the next meeting.

5. The revised terms of reference were approved by the Committee. Members considered whether the balance between sector bodies and agencies and institutional representatives should be adjusted in favour of more institutional representatives. It was noted that membership of the Committee would be reviewed after a year, and members agreed that current membership was sufficient until then. Members questioned whether student representation would still be included within the membership, it was confirmed by HEFCE that two student representatives would be joining the Committee shortly.

Item 3 Presentations from project groups

Higher Education Academy

6. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) gave a presentation on the work relating to degree standards, updating the Committee on the progress of the project to date.
7. The Committee discussed the development of training for external examiners. It was noted that no Scottish providers or alternative providers were included in the pilot activity. HEA reported that a Scottish institution had recently expressed an interest in taking part in the pilot and this would be explored. As a contingency, an open event in Edinburgh had been scheduled, which Scottish providers would be able to attend. Although no alternative providers were taking part in the pilot (as outside the scope of the contract agreed with the funding bodies), there is alternative provider representation on the project board, and HEA could seek to secure an alternative provider as an early adopter in year two of the project, dependent on discussions with the funders.

8. The Committee discussed options for targeted communications to mitigate the lack of a regional event in Northern Ireland. Although all events were open to NI providers, it was agreed that proactive invitations to NI providers would be helpful.
9. The Committee discussed development of approaches to the calibration of standards. It was felt that more involvement from non-vocational, arts and humanities subject areas would be helpful. Members discussed that calibration, representing the comparison of standards across departments, should be differentiated from assessment practices. There was a discussion on the underlying purpose of the calibration activities, and the HEA team were asked if they saw the outcomes as encouraging diversity, or channelling providers towards the same approach. The HEA consider it is too early to analyse the pilot outcomes, but it was recognised across the Committee that while some range in approaches was inevitable, an element of convergence was desirable.

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

10. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) gave a presentation on the programme of work to explore the support needed by governing bodies, updating the Committee on the progress of the project to date.
11. The Committee noted that alternative providers had deliberately not been included in the scope of the project, as specified in the tender. At the time of the tender, the added complexity of taking into account very diverse governance arrangements at alternative providers had been felt to be unhelpful. Initial work aimed to gain a good understanding of the funders' core area of responsibility. A look at the broader principles of governance which apply to all types of providers could be an appropriate piece of future work for the Office for Students. It was noted that HEFCE had developed a sophisticated understanding of governance patterns across the alternative provider sector, and that this would be of interest to the Committee in the future.
12. It was also noted that there was not currently a HE in FE representative on LFHE's Governor Development Advisory Forum. Andy Shenstone from LFHE offered to take a discussion of membership forward as an action.

ACTION: HEFCE to discuss with LFHE how it will incorporate HE in FE representation on its Governor Advisory forum.

13. The Committee discussed with LFHE whether the initial findings of the project would help governing bodies answer the specific questions posed by the new quality assurance statements required for Annual Provider Review (APR). It was clarified that the work described so far was a baselining exercise to gain a thorough understanding of current governance practice. Amongst other areas, the baselining exercise would help to identify where existing practice could address the questions posed by APR, and where any gaps needed to be filled.

Quality Assurance Agency

14. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) gave a presentation on its programme of work on transnational education. The Committee noted that the QAA was seeking endorsement of:

- its approach to strategic review
- the handbook for transnational education
- the proposed programme of country reviews over the next three years.

15. The Committee discussed the planned programme of country reviews. [REDACTED]

Members suggested that inclusion of a diagram in the TNE handbook setting out the aims and scope of the TNE review might be beneficial, along with greater transparency about the process of institution inclusion and selection in the review. The Committee discussed QAA's approach to strategic engagement, noting that the QAA would need to pay particular attention to how it would maintain its international position following Brexit. The QAA was encouraged to ensure a joined up approach to transnational education, and to avoid duplication with other bodies working in this area. It was noted that the Bologna process was not dependent on EU membership and was likely to remain important.

UUK/GuildHE

16. Will Hammonds from UUK spoke about the programme of work with GuildHE on degree classification algorithms, noting the sensitivity and complexity of work in this area. The project was reporting to the Student Policy Network at UUK, and to the Quality Practitioner Network at GuildHE; however, initial findings and proposed next steps would be brought to the Committee for consideration over the summer.

17. The Committee discussed the drivers behind this programme of work, asking whether the project sought simply to identify variance of practice between individual providers, or would recommend an element of convergence. It was clarified that the language of the revised operating model framed this work in terms of gaining an initial understanding of the existing variation, then asking whether it was possible to identify a reasonable range of algorithms. The research should identify in particular whether there was any outlying practice that would cause concern across the sector.

18. The Committee discussed the inclusion of validated FE Colleges, Alternative Providers, and providers with foundation degree awarding powers. UUK confirmed that the project would seek to encompass the diversity of degrees and providers across the sector and the project team would investigate this further as the project progresses.

19. The Committee thanked the project team representatives for their presentations, and external speakers left the meeting at this point.

ACTION: Secretariat to circulate project team presentations to Standing Committee members.

Item 4 Discussion of updates and project plans from HEA, UUK, LFHE and QAA

20. The Committee had a wide-ranging discussion about the progress of the projects, and how it would wish to engage with ongoing work in the future. In addition to the feedback already given, the following suggestions were made:

- The Committee was keen for the LFHE work to address critical issues around good governance, as well as specific questions on the quality assurance statement required for APR.
- 'Data literacy of external examiners' would be a useful addition to the HEA programme of training.
- The HEA needed to ensure that pilot activities for the calibration strand were carefully presented to ensure activities were focussing on calibration and not assessment.
- The connections between the strands of work, particularly HEA's work on standards and UUK's work on degree algorithms, were noted, and the Committee recommended that coordination between the projects should be encouraged.
- Project teams from the HEA, LFHE and QAA should be encouraged to utilise the UKSC's role in providing UK-wide oversight for their activities. Future discussions could focus on the risks the projects were facing, and the support the UKSC could offer to mitigate these risks.

23. The Committee was satisfied with the rationale provided for the QAA's proposed programme of international activity and approved the proposed countries for review in the next three years. Members noted that the new statutory regulations in Wales meant that HEFCW could not agree changes relating to quality without consultation. Douglas Blackstock and Celia Hunt would discuss the practicalities of this relating to QAA's work outside of the meeting.

24. The Committee returned to its earlier discussions about standards and considered whether convergence was the aim, or whether diversity was being presented as an acceptable model by the projects working in this area. Again it was clarified that the revised operating model provided useful framing for the degree standards programmes of work. There was a need to provide public and sector confidence in standards, at threshold and beyond, not least to protect the UK sector's reputation. A one-size-fits-all solution was not desirable, but approaches to standards should provide consistency and transparency. It was discussed that institutional autonomy in this area should be properly recognised, but stakeholders, including students, should be able to access evidence that would support confidence in the reasonable comparability of standards across a diverse sector.

25. Members considered how the Committee should engage with the projects. The following points were agreed:

- a. It would be useful for Committee members to have more active engagement with the projects and to experience the outputs (such as training materials, workshops etc.) first-hand. Although Committee members were represented on some of the project boards already as

sector representatives, it was agreed there was a role for more active involvement from Committee members, and that this would be taken forward through a sub group structure. Arrangements should seek to avoid placing undue reporting burdens on the project teams and existing reporting mechanisms, and opportunities for engagement, would be used wherever possible.

- b. The Committee recognised that it had a key role in articulating the strategic drivers for the projects and the intended outcomes, and should provide a steer for project teams. There was also recognition that the 'big picture' questions that the projects were seeking to answer have moved on somewhat since the inception of the projects. A separate workshop should be arranged to reset the strategic context for work on degree standards in particular, and plan how to feed into project teams. The Committee also noted that its work in relation to standards had been referenced in the House of Lords discussions for the Higher Education and Research Bill. (Note – the role of the Committee is outlined in Viscount Younger's letter to the Lords, which can be found here: http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/files/DEP2017-0028/Younger_letter_to_peers_on_the_HE_R_Bill_cttee_day_1.pdf)

ACTION: Secretariat to arrange workshop on standards and the role of the Committee.

Item 5 Oversight of the Quality code

26. Douglas Blackstock introduced the paper that set out proposed arrangements for the future oversight of the Quality Code, stressing the importance of protecting the integrity of the Code as a UK-wide resource, with international standing. The paper noted the key role played by the UKSC in providing sector-wide oversight of the Quality Code. It also proposed a reinvigorated QAA Steering Group that would take forward implementation of any development of the Quality Code agreed by the UKSC. This would be an expert group, drawn from across the sector.
27. The Committee endorsed the new arrangements for a practitioner-focussed QAA group. It was discussed that within the paper there were a number of proposals already under consideration, some of which had already commenced development. Given the governance role of the UKSC in providing strategic oversight of development of the Quality Code, it was agreed that all proposals should be fully considered by the Committee before full implementation by the QAA. The Committee noted that some of the proposals for consideration would need full and in-depth discussion, therefore an extended meeting of the Committee, dedicated to proposals for development of the Code, would seem appropriate.

ACTION: Secretariat to consider timetabling of discussion on the Quality Code, including agreement for proposed development in the current year, alongside the Committee's other planned workshop and meetings.

Item 6 Baseline Regulatory Requirements

28. Scott Court reported that following the last meeting of the Committee, the Baseline Regulatory Requirements had been published on the HEFCE website. Further plans to produce student focused communications about the Baseline Regulatory Requirements, and a visual map of how the new quality arrangements apply across the UK, were underway with the help of the NUS and HEFCE's corporate communications team.
29. The Committee considered the recently published materials. Some minor edits were suggested for the Baseline Regulatory Requirements; it was noted that the Scottish ombudsman did not deal with academic appeals, and the QAA continue to operate a concerns scheme for Scottish providers.

ACTION: HEFCE to make corrections on the Baseline Regulatory Requirements document on its website.

Item 7 Any Other Business

30. No other business was raised.

Item 8 Date of next meeting

31. The date of the next meeting would be confirmed – this had been left open pending further discussions on the future work of the Committee and formation of sub groups.

Action	Owner
Add funders' update as agenda item at next meeting	Secretariat
Discuss with LFHE how it will incorporate HE in FE representation on its Governor Advisory Forum	HEFCE
Circulate project team presentations to members	Secretariat
Arrange workshop on Quality Code, standards and the role of the Committee	Secretariat
Make corrections to Baseline Regulatory Requirements	HEFCE