

**UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment
Minutes of meeting held on Thursday 21 March 2019 at OfS offices, Finlaison House,
London**

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey (Chair, Northumbria University)
Eve Alcock (University of Bath Student Union)
Dr Dee Bird (SFC)
Professor Mary Bishop (Independent)
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Professor Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Gavin Campbell (Department for the Economy, NI) (by phone)
Charlotte Corrish (OIA)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Amatey Doku (NUS)
Will Hammonds (UUK)
Professor David S Jones (Queen's University Belfast) (by phone)
Susan Lapworth (OfS)
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Dr Arti Saraswat (AoC)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)

Apologies:

Gordon Ashworth (CMA)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Jackie Yip (Vice-President for Education of Cardiff University Student Union)

Secretariat: Gemma Tombs and Judith Crowther

Agenda item 1: Chair's welcome and apologies (Chair)

1. The Chair introduced the meeting and welcomed Eve Alcock as one of the new student representatives on the committee, and Charlotte Corrish as an alternate for Ben Elger (OIA) for this meeting.

Agenda item 2: Update from the UK funding bodies/regulator and cross-nation matters (Chair)

2. HEFCW informed the committee that it had just received a letter from the Welsh Minister for Education setting out the Minister's expectations and priorities for the year ahead. The letter included a number of priorities relating to quality and standards, including expecting HEFCW to work with the other nations to look into grade inflation.
3. SFC had recently established a Learning Enhancement Committee, which would meet for the first time next month. This was created to support the SFC Board's understanding of the UK-wide position on quality and standards, including the UKSCQA's activity.

4. DfENI was currently restructuring its HE division, and it was expected that it would have a new head of branch in place for the next UKSCQA meeting in June.
5. OfS was nearing the end of its registration process. It planned to publish the patterns from its registration outcomes in due course, which would illustrate the quality and standards themes emerging from the registration process. Ministers in England were presently showing significant interest in quality and standards matters, including current UKSCQA activity on degree standards.

Agenda item 3: Committee matters (Chair)

6. The Chair introduced a paper which set out current committee matters, held over from the February UKSCQA meeting which he had been unable to attend. This set out progress since May 2018 when the UKSCQA had met to discuss the future work of the UKSCQA.
7. The UKSCQA had committed to creating a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to set out the role and responsibilities of core members of the UKSCQA. An early version had been discussed at an autumn meeting of the UKSCQA, and feedback from this version had been integrated into the current version. The Chair informed the committee that an updated version would be brought to the next UKSCQA meeting.
8. Members agreed that there was a need for all members to have the opportunity to input into the agenda. It was agreed that members could contact the secretariat at any point if they had any agenda items they might want to add to a future meeting, and that the secretariat would send out a call for agenda items a month before each meeting.

Action: Secretariat to invite agenda items from members a month prior to each meeting.

9. Members also discussed the possible communications role that the UKSCQA might fulfil. It was agreed that there is a need for an international understanding of the UK quality and standards arrangements, and that the UKSCQA should consider this in its external communications. QAA informed the committee that it had a poster setting out the diversity of approaches to HE in the UK, and that it could circulate this.

Action: QAA to circulate its poster setting out the UK arrangements for quality and standards assessment.

Agenda item 4: Transparent, consistent and fair academic standards (UUK)

10. UUK introduced the two papers it had produced for this item. These were: a paper setting out the responses from the UKSCQA's recent consultation on transparent, consistent and fair academic standards, and a draft statement of intent. This was developed based upon the consultation responses.
11. UUK had been pleased by the level of support demonstrated in the responses to the consultation. Although there had been a mixed picture in the responses with some completely in support, some saying it doesn't go far enough and some saying it went too far, there was a clear recognition of the importance of institutional autonomy and

thus institutional ownership of any response. There was also an awareness of the complexity and political sensitivity of this issue, and the potential reputational consequences for the sector if it did not appear to be taking action.

12. There was clear demonstration of support in England, with some respondents indicating that the consultation proposals didn't go far enough. The degree outcomes statement was supported in principle and in practice. Respondents in Wales demonstrated a willingness to work with the statement, and respondents from Scotland felt that the processes set out in the consultation were already in place. Respondents from Northern Ireland felt that they already had sufficient processes in place, and had some concerns about whether this was the right way forward. It would therefore be important to manage relationships across the nations, and to recognize that there were already existing good practices and processes to draw upon.
13. UUK and GuildHE had considered this in the drafting of the proposed statement of intent, setting out a framework with high-level principles that it felt all would be able to agree with and use if they felt they needed to. The statement would emphasize the importance of explaining a provider's approach to ensuring the transparency, consistency and fairness of its standards, the need for externality (potentially via the Advance Higher Education external examiner project), and the requirement to meet the baseline FHEQ standards. The UKSCQA agreed that the statement would need to:
 - Express high-level UK-wide principles that could be agreed across all four nations
 - Include nation-specific text which would be agreed between the sector bodies and funder/regulator for each of the nations
 - Be simple, transparent and understandable by all
 - Avoid duplication – if good practice already exists in providers or through national arrangements, then there is no intention that this needs to be duplicated
 - Demonstrate the sector's action in this space
14. It was agreed that the current drafting of the statement captured most of this, but that there was further nation-specific work needed as well as a strong proofread for clarity and comprehension. UUK would take this forward with the individual nations (both sector and funder/regulator representatives). The sector representative bodies would be signatories to the statement, although this would not contain actual signatures.

Action: National sector and funder/regulator representatives to work with UUK to finalise nation-specific drafting in the statement of intent.
15. The Association of Colleges representative noted that transparency regarding degree classifications was particularly complex for colleges, which worked with a variety of degree awarding bodies with different regulations and degree classification algorithms. Universities would need to consider this when taking forward their individual approaches following the publication of the statement.
16. NUS noted that students would also have an interest in the wording, as well as what action would be taken following the publication of the statement of intent. It would be important to engage with students as the statement of intent was taken forwards, and to consider a variety of means of engagement (e.g. blogs/events).

17. The UKSCQA then discussed the timelines for response. It was agreed that the sector would need to be seen to respond in a timely manner. This was particularly important in England and Wales where there were clear political sensitivities. However, the detail of implementation would be considered at a national rather than UK-wide level.
18. Members briefly discussed the potential impact of the current inclusion of numbers of upper degrees awarded in league tables, on the number of upper degrees awarded. It was agreed that alongside the work on the statement of intent, there might also be merit in meeting with league table compilers in the future.

Agenda item 5: Transnational education (QAA)

19. QAA provided an oral update on its transnational education activity, and particularly the plans surrounding the proposed country review for Malaysia. This would be going ahead, funded by subscriptions to the QAA.
20. There was a current working group, coordinated by UUK International (UUKi) which was exploring next steps for future TNE activity. This would be brought to the UUK board in April, and an update would be provided by QAA following this discussion with the board.
21. Members agreed that there was a need for clear communications on how TNE is regulated across the UK, and that this would continue to remain on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

Agenda item 6: Academic integrity (QAA)

22. QAA provided an oral update on its plans around academic integrity and essay mills. It would test the sector's thinking on this through its consultation on QAA's commercial offering across the UK.
23. UUK and GuildHE were currently participating in a working group (chaired by Bill Rammell) to explore the future work of HESA and QAA outside of their respective roles as the Designated Data Body and Designated Quality Body in England, and QAA's work on academic integrity would be discussed as part of this working group.
24. The Secretary of State was showing particular interest in work on essay mills and had been working with QAA on a media campaign. QAA was also meeting with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to discuss potential fraud prosecutions regarding students who had been blackmailed by essay mills.
25. The UKSCQA agreed that it needed to understand the impact of the essay mills/contract cheating guidance published by QAA and NUS in 2017. It also discussed what a potential good practice potential charter for providers to support them in taking action on the use of essay mills might look like and whether this might be of benefit. It was agreed that this was a live issue and should be brought for more discussion at the UKSCQA at a later date.

Agenda item 7: AOB (Chair)

26. There was one item of AOB, introduced by the Association of Colleges. AoC informed the committee that the college representative bodies for each of the nations had set up the Four Nations College Alliance to share practice and inform policy for colleges at the UK-wide level. It was particularly focused on what future colleges should look like (when delivering both HE and FE) and had set up an educational commission to consider this. This would report in spring 2020. Further information could be found here:

<https://www.aoc.co.uk/system/files/Developing%20a%20Four%20Nations%20College%20Blueprint%20for%20a%20Post-Brexit%20Economy%20%28Report%29.pdf>

27. There were no further items of AOB. The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions, and informed the committee that the next meeting would be scheduled shortly and was likely to be held in June 2019.