

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of meeting held on 6 June 2018 at OfS Offices, Finlaison House, London

In attendance

Members:

Professor Andrew Wathey (Chair, Northumbria University)
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Amanda Chetwynd
Alison Cook (SFC) (by phone)
Amatey Doku (NUS)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Will Hammonds (UUK)
Susan Lapworth (OfS)
Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Luke Renwick (Sheffield Hallam University)
Arti Saraswat (AoC)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Claire Thompson (Department for the Economy, NI) (by phone)

Secretariat:

Jess Bacon (Clerk)
Sheila Wolfenden (Clerk)

QAA (for items 4 and 5)

Maureen McLaughlin (by phone)
Gai Murphy (by phone)

Apologies

Emma Atkins (University of Manchester)
Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Scott Court (Secretary)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
David Jones (Queen's University Belfast)
Mike Lambourne (CMA)
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Alison Wheaton (independent).

Item 1: Chair's welcome and apologies

1. The Chair welcomed members and noted apologies, as listed above. He informed the Committee that it was Luke Renwick's final meeting as he is moving from his Student Union post to another role. He also advised that Ali Orr has moved on to a new role and, as of this meeting, has resigned from the Committee as the PSRB representative. He thanked

both of them for their work on the Committee and wished them well.

Item 2: Minutes of the last meeting and matters arising

2. The minutes of the meeting on 14 February 2018 were agreed as a correct record, except for one amendment, which was to add Amanda Chetwynd to the list of attendees. All actions had been completed. There were no matters arising.

Item 3: Update from UK funding bodies/regulators and cross-nation matters

3. HEFCW advised that the Welsh quality assessment framework had been published in March, and that it would be followed by a formal launch in late June, to which Committee members were invited. The new framework retains the sense of a UK-wide quality system in a devolved environment and, amongst other functions, includes a gateway for designation for student support. HEFCW is currently in the process of contracting with the QAA to provide reviews for designation. The Chair and David Blaney (Chief Executive [CE] of HEFCW) have spoken recently by phone, and it is now proposed that a meeting between the UKSCQA Chair and the CEs of the four national funding bodies/regulators should take place in the near future to discuss UK-wide priorities.

4. SFC noted that quality arrangements in Scotland are in a stable state and that there was nothing new to report in the quality dimension. SFC are developing their thinking about how Scotland should respond to changes taking place elsewhere in the UK. The Chair noted that following on from his call with HEFCW, he would shortly be talking to the CEs of SFC and OfS, and a call had already taken place with Heather Cousins of DfENI.

5. Northern Ireland is still without a government, which means there is no Minister for the Economy. DfENI advised that the Revised Operating Model remains, at least in the short term, the quality assessment model for Northern Ireland, and that there is no plan for significant deviation from this at present. Northern Ireland are in the midst of their second APR process, which is being implemented by OfS. DfENI's Chief Executive equivalent is content to meet with the CEs of the other funding bodies/regulators and the Chair, as mentioned above.

6. OfS reported that the Regulatory Framework had been launched at the end of February and the OfS itself on 1 April. The registration process was currently open for existing and new providers and, as of the date of this meeting, there had been 340 applications for registration. In total, over 550 were expected. The OfS were starting the assessment process for the first batch of applications. Organisational change was taking place in the OfS at the same time as considerable operational work, which presented a challenge.

7. Jess Bacon updated the meeting on the status of transnational education (TNE) review. The contract with the QAA is due to finish after the review of TNE in Hong Kong in August 2018 and funding bodies/regulators had suggested that future approaches to TNE should be discussed at a Committee meeting. Douglas Blackstock mentioned that there was concern within some elements of the sector, both nationally and internationally, about a lack of external review of TNE in future and that a way forward needed to be found to avoid

reputational risk for the UK. QAA have been discussing options internally and this could be forwarded to the committee if of interest. A main question for discussion is should assurance in this area be sector-driven or do the funding bodies/regulators have a role? The position of the OfS is that the regulatory framework makes provision for the regulation of TNE as it does for every student at a provider – however, it is up to the sector if they want or need something additional. The other funding bodies and regulators would like to consider options in this area. The Chair concluded that future approaches to TNE should be a main agenda item at a forthcoming Committee meeting. **ACTION: Secretariat.**

Item 4: Quality Code update

8. The Chair welcomed Maureen McLaughlin of the QAA, who joined the meeting by phone. Maureen reported that the QAA had run seven advice and guidance workshops on the revised Quality Code, all of which had had a high level of attendance, and UKSCQA members' involvement in the events had been extremely helpful. The outcomes of the workshops will feed into writing groups, for which approximately 250 people have already signed up. These, and reading groups for the final documents, will operate between June and August, and Committee members' participation in both kinds of group would be helpful. The advice and guidance component of the Code is due for completion in September and sign-off by UKSCQA in October. QAA recognise that this will be a challenging time for some sector representatives to contribute to the process and have been clear on the level of time and commitment required throughout busy periods.

9. The QAA aims to ensure that how the core and common practices link to the practical advice and guidance is made as explicit as possible in final documentation, and this needs careful consideration. The QAA is also developing guidance for the writing groups on making the Code as succinct as possible. Maureen estimated the final length of the Code to be a maximum of 20 pages for each of the eleven themes, although these will vary in length. The Chair said that 60 pages in total would be a useful expectation and that QAA might want to use this as a guide. He also encouraged QAA to consider the best balance between accessibility and an appropriate level of guidance. The Committee would be keen to ensure that the new code is not an unwieldy document, and avoids the repetition in the current version.

10. At the same time, the QAA is developing an interactive website for the Code, which will be accessible for students and other users, and will be ready by the publication of the Code in November. It is envisaged that this will be an interactive model, allowing audiences to select sections relevant to their interests. QAA staff working on the development of the Quality Code have offered to do a demonstration of the website for members in the near future before it goes live.

11. QAA would particularly welcome the Committee's involvement in the writing and reading groups. The secretariat would send details of these groups to members and Maureen agreed to circulate a final list of themes emerging from the workshop discussions. **ACTION: Secretariat, QAA.**

12. The Chair noted that there would be a further update at the next meeting in October (see paragraph 28). He thanked Maureen for her contribution and she left the meeting.

Item 5: Degree standards update

13. Will Hammonds introduced paper 18/12, an update on progress of the grade inflation and improvement project, which forms part of the programme of work on degree standards led by UUK, GuildHE and QAA, overseen by UKSCQA.

14. Progress has been made on the research strand of the project (understanding the trends in degree classification data), and Ray Bachan has been commissioned to undertake this work. The analysis aims to isolate improvement vs grade inflation. Another strand of the project aims to consider how management at a provider can meet challenges in this area – looking at management tools and performance incentives. The work will also reference the earlier degree classification algorithm report and recommendations arising from this. The overall aim of the project is to make concrete recommendations to the sector, with associated recommendations to funders/regulators and bodies such as the QAA.

15. Will reported that the degree classification criteria (set out in Annex A to paper 18/12) is making progress and will be ready by September. It has developed iteratively following feedback from various sector groups and representatives. A remaining focus for engagement is with student and employer groups. Some members considered that the employer view is likely to be an important consideration as a key end user – how are they differentiating between students at the moment? Are they facing issues here? Ongoing issues for finalising the criteria centre around consistency of language, and the appropriate level of detail that is needed. How it will be used in each nation's national context is still to be discussed. UUK envisage that the criteria will be a useful reference point for the sector, but there is a wider engagement aim as well – explaining to wider stakeholders what is achieved in each degree classification. The classification criteria will be ready for publication in September (after UKSCQA has considered the final output), but the remaining project outputs are likely to be available in October.

16. The Chair thanked Will for his comprehensive report. At this point, Gai Murphy of the QAA joined the meeting by phone and was welcomed by the Chair. QAA discussed that the sector has so far welcomed the classification criteria in principle, particularly as a learning tool for students in their progression, whilst also feeding back that the criteria should be disentangled from the politics around grade inflation. The Committee would echo this sentiment. There was some discussion on how the work intersects with the principle of institutional autonomy – UUK have been working with institutional autonomy as an overriding principle, but that does not negate the need for the sector to respond to stakeholder concerns in this area. There is a need for consistent and shared good practice. Analysis has shown variety of practice when it comes to borderline students – with the hard borderline of 70% being enforced at some but not all institutions. The issue of granularity within the first classification is interesting and likely to warrant more attention from the Committee when the project outputs are discussed.

17. Further to the comments raised above, the Committee noted that it would be useful to understand the relationship between this ongoing work and other frameworks and guidance already existing in the sector. For example, the TEF framework. UUK can see more potential linkages in the future – such as the project outcomes better equipping TEF panel members to interpret grade inflation data. In addition, it would be useful for the project to be clear on the relationship between the new documentation and the FHEQ and benchmark statements. The role of external examiners should also be a key element and it is important that the appropriate links are in place between this project and the AdvanceHE programme of work. Engagement with the sector to date has found many examples of good practice in terms of external examiners and achieving appropriate oversight over standards across a programme and it is important these are shared with the sector. UUK were also encouraged to ensure that appropriate levels of engagement continue with all nations of the UK – the project team could usefully do more to explain the drivers and aims of this work to the devolved nations.

18. The Chair said that members should email Will if they had any further comments. He thanked the Committee and Gai for their contributions and Gai left the meeting.

Item 6: Follow-up to 17 May workshop on how the Committee works

19. Two papers were discussed: the facilitator's report of the workshop (18/13) and a first draft of the proposed contents of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and revised Terms of Reference (ToR) (18/14).

20. Starting with 18/14, the Chair noted that this paper is a start in terms of providing an early template, but that there is further work to be done. He reminded members that the MoU is concerned with specifying governance arrangements and areas of authority for the Committee. The latter are actually included in the existing Terms of Reference and will need to be moved to the MoU in due course. The 'owners' of the MoU will need to be identified (envisaged as funding bodies/regulators, student bodies and sector bodies) and this is likely to be an item for discussion at the forthcoming meeting of the Chair and the four Chief Executives of the UK funding bodies/regulators. Two 'road maps' will also need to be taken forward as underpinnings for the MoU - these will cover the concepts of 'UK-wideness' and co-regulation in relation to the Committee's work. The Chair invited comments from members, in particular, funders/regulators and sector and student body representatives.

21. Members felt that the paper was a good start in outlining the basis for the MoU and revised ToR. There was general agreement that the MoU needed to underline the importance of 'UK-wideness' in the Committee's remit, mapping the regulatory contexts of the UK nations and identifying alignment and shared concerns and where there are divergences between the nations.

22. The need for clarity in the MoU about the Committee's responsibilities was discussed, and it was noted that these needed to be understood in their wider context, in relation to the role and remit of other bodies, to ensure that the Committee adheres to its remit. In relation to this, outward-facing communication about the Committee's role and remit is important.

23. Members discussed ownership of the MoU, noting that AOC, as a core sector body, should be added to the list of ‘owners’ or co-signatories. Issues around the signatories would be taken forward in discussion outside of this meeting. **ACTION: Chair, Secretariat.**

24. There followed a discussion on the workshop report (18/13). It was noted that this was a report on the main outcomes of the day, rather than the detail of each individual session and its discussion.

25. Members reflected on Section 8 of the report, on whether the secretariat should be independent and properly resourced. It would be important to consider a specification of the work of secretariat in order to progress this further. **ACTION: Secretariat to provide a specification of their work.**

26. The issue of filling membership vacancies following recent resignations was discussed, and it was felt that this could be addressed alongside the MoU and ToR, reviewing the membership as a whole in order to provide an appropriate balance of representatives between the four nations, and between sector and funder/regulator representatives.

Item 7: Any Other Business

27. Douglas Blackstock gave an update from his recent attendance at the Bologna Ministerial Forum. Sam Gyimah (the Higher Education Minister in England) had presented here and had offered continued commitment to European working – this may well be an indication of continued participation in the Bologna process.

Item 8: Date of next meeting

28. The next full meeting of the Committee will be on Wednesday 17 October at 1300 – 1530 in Finlaison House, London. There will be a meeting for sector representatives on Monday 3 September at UniversitiesUK, London.

Actions

Action	Ref	Owner
TNE to be an agenda item at a future UKSCQA meeting	Para. 7	Secretariat
Details of Quality Code writing and reading groups and a final list of advice and guidance themes to be circulated to members. This has now been actioned.	Para. 11	QAA, Secretariat
Identify owners/signatories of MoU	Para. 22	Chair, Secretariat
Provide a specification of the Secretariat’s work.	Para. 24	Secretariat