

## **UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment**

### **Minutes of meetings held on 3 and 6 September 2018**

Two separate meetings were held to discuss the degree standards programme and are recorded here in one document for ease of reference.

### **Minutes of meeting held on 3 September 2018 at UUK, Woburn House, London**

#### **In attendance**

##### **Members:**

Professor Andrew Wathey (Chair, Northumbria University)  
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)  
Alex Bols (GuildHE)  
Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)  
Amanda Chetwynd (University of Lancaster)  
Amatey Doku (NUS)  
Ben Elger (OIA)  
Will Hammonds (UUK)  
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)  
John Rushworth (CUC)  
Arti Saraswat (AoC)  
John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)

##### **Secretariat:**

Jess Bacon (Clerk)  
Sheila Wolfenden (Clerk)

#### **Additional guest from the QAA:**

Gai Murphy

#### **Apologies:**

Emma Atkins (University of Manchester)  
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)  
Mike Lambourne (CMA)

#### **Item 1: Chair's welcome**

1. The Chair welcomed members to this special meeting of the committee, dedicated to the degree standards work that has been taken forward by UUK, GuildHE and QAA. Gai Murphy was welcomed to the meeting. Gai had been invited to attend given her coordinating role on this work on the QAA's behalf. Given issues with availability in arranging a full meeting of the committee, an additional meeting would be held on this topic by teleconference on 6 September, for the four UK funding bodies/regulators.

#### **Item 2: Degree standards papers**

2. The purpose of the meeting is to review and discuss three documents representing the outcome of the degree standards work to date. These are: paper 18/15, the degree classification descriptors; paper 18/16, draft recommendations; and paper 18/17, project outputs and engagement with the sector. The committee noted the need for the funders/regulators to consider the materials in a subsequent meeting, but were encouraged to give a strong steer on the future final content of these documents. The Chair noted that if substantial refinement were needed, there would be opportunities for the committee to consider materials again. However, it would be useful if the committee could say something publicly on the progress of this work, given that it had publicly committed to publish outcomes from the work in the autumn of this year (12 months on from when the project had been initiated).

#### Paper UKSC 18/15: degree classification descriptors

3. This paper was introduced by Gai Murphy. The committee had considered an earlier iteration of this document, but some changes had been made following sector consultation. There was now a high-level version of the classification framework, in addition to the detailed version that the committee had originally considered. Consultation over the last few months has focused on the devolved nations, and additional consultation with employer groups and student groups has led to refinements in the language.

4. The student viewpoint on the documents has been of particular interest. Students were very supportive of a framework that would revitalise the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2.2 classifications. It is important that these classifications are represented as the pass marks that they are – and not as ‘failures’.

5. The committee were supportive of the principle behind the classification descriptors: namely, that in this time of increased transparency and accountability, clear, sector-agreed classifications such as this could help to maintain trust in the UK degree. The committee were interested in where the documents would sit within an institution’s own guidance documents and frameworks. The descriptor should be positioned as a reference point, with the primary reference point still remaining the learning outcomes of a particular course. The descriptors could do more to flag that learning outcomes have to meet the requirements of the national frameworks, and that providers have a responsibility to ensure their curriculums are at the appropriate level. UUK will undertake to make this more explicit in the next iteration.

6. It was considered that more could be done to ensure the framework works across the UK, for example, with more sensitivity to the Scottish qualification structure. How the descriptors should be used in conjunction with the qualification frameworks across all the nations should be made more explicit.

7. Members saw value in both the high-level and more detailed versions of the descriptors. The high-level version may be useful to explain the UK-wide position, and as an accessible resource for students and employers. The granular detail in the longer descriptor is likely to be useful for newer providers, many of whom do not have an equivalent framework (as QAA found when they undertook the consultation). It could be communicated as an advisory tool for providers to utilise in their own contexts. For example, providers may choose to adapt the descriptors at a subject-specific level. UUK undertook to finalise the

language in these versions, looking at any repetition and clarity of meaning.

8. It was considered that there would be a variety of audiences for these descriptors, within providers this would range from use within departments, to external examiners, governing bodies, and students. There would be benefits to encouraging students to engage with the material but it would need further work to increase its accessibility.

#### Paper UKSC 18/16 Draft recommendations

9. UUK introduced this paper, which outlined the proposed recommendations arising out of the degree standards work that UUK, GuildHE and QAA have undertaken over the last 12 months. The recommendations reflect the committee's past discussions, and the UUK Board's view, that it is the sector's responsibility to ensure standards remain robust, and it must take concrete steps to address any issues. At this stage the recommendations are framed in the UK-wide context, but the next stage of development will be to consider the recommendations in the light of each nation's context, and to see if they need to be adapted accordingly.

10. The Chair reiterated the principles behind this work: it was important that any issues with grade inflation be addressed, so that trends in increasing standards become better understood and managed, and any improvement in performance can therefore be recognised as such. The committee were in agreement that the presentation of the work is particularly important and must be done sensitively – it is about improving transparency in the system and maintaining trust in the UK standards, not just about tackling grade inflation.

11. Members recommended that the language be reconsidered to ensure it is appropriate to all elements within the sector. It should be clear where actions are recommended for all providers or for degree awarding institutions. It should also be clear that the recommendations are intended to work in conjunction with a provider's own processes, i.e. this is not something that will be imposed upon providers, but providers will be encouraged to engage with the recommendations in their own contexts.

12. The paper also outlined a number of future areas for consideration, such as further differentiation of the 1<sup>st</sup> classification. It was clarified that these are just suggestions for where attention might be directed in the future, so there will be opportunities for the committee to discuss these further in coming meetings. The intention behind raising these areas for exploration at this stage is to signal an intention to ensure that the degree classification system remains fit for purpose into the future.

13. The underpinning research and full report for these recommendations would be circulated to members shortly. Members were particularly interested in the linkages between this work and the external examiner project being taken forward by AdvanceHE, and encouraged UUK to ensure they were working closely with this organisation. There must be a focus on future guidance and support for providers that will equip them to address these issues internally. The aim of the work is not to infringe on institutional autonomy, but to ensure that good practice and sound processes are shared amongst the sector, on a UK-

wide basis. Members recommended that further UK-wide engagement is needed for this work to ensure sector buy-in.

Paper 18/17 Grade inflation outputs

14. This paper outlined the planned engagement with the sector once final outputs and recommendations were agreed. UUK noted that a multi-stakeholder engagement piece would be needed, which the committee were supportive of. NUS extended an offer to assist with any student-specific engagement.

**Item 3: AOB**

15. No other business was raised.

**Minutes of meeting held by teleconference on 6 September 2018**

**In attendance:**

Andrew Wathey (Chair)

Alison Cook (SFC)

Will Hammonds (UUK)

Nicola Hunt (HEFCW)

Susan Lapworth (OfS)

**Secretariat:**

Jessica Bacon (OfS)

Scott Court (OfS)

**Apologies:**

Gavin Campbell (DfENI)

1. The Chair welcomed members to this special teleconference, dedicated to the degree standards work that had been taken forward over the last year by UUK, GuildHE and QAA. He noted that there had been substantial discussion in this area over the past week. This had started with the UKSCQA sector representatives meeting on 3 September, but also in that week the UUK Board and Student Policy Network had also considered the outcomes of this project at UUK's annual conference. The Chair set out some of the main outcomes from those discussions. There appeared to be a general consensus that the originally proposed timescale of publishing the project outcomes and associated recommendations in September was too condensed. More time is needed to engage the sector with the work and the underpinning research and evidence. Both the committee members and the UUK Board had been supportive of the draft materials, but a longer timescale, allowing for public

consultation and debate, would allay some concerns raised that the end of the project not be too rushed.

2. UUK will therefore be proposing that outcomes are not published in September, but rather that a few months be taken in public consultation. The delay should be short – with the aim of outcomes still being published in early Spring – as there will be some public (media and political) contributors who are likely to comment on the sector’s delay in responding to this issue.
3. The main points of feedback from the initial UKSCQA meeting on 3 September were summarised for the funders/regulators’ information. The funders/regulators were supportive of a UK-wide articulation of the work in the first instance, but noted that there are likely to be some differing nation-specific regulatory requirements that will impact upon how the outcomes/recommendations of this work are adopted in each nation. Members noted the need for further engagement with the sector, and further elaboration of the underpinning evidence that has led to the recommendations. They expressed support for the recommendations as currently phrased, however – and a hope that the consultation will not lead to extensive dilution of the recommendations and the helpful and proactive steer they currently give to the sector.
4. The timing and format of the consultation was then discussed. It is envisaged that this will run in a similar way to the UKSCQA-led Quality Code consultation; i.e. this will be a consultation run by UUK/GuildHE and QAA on the committee’s behalf. It will be important to flag when launched that this is a UK-wide consultation. The ownership of UKSCQA is important in terms of framing the proposals for external audiences: UKSCQA as a group gives a useful element of externality that will give the work credibility amongst wider stakeholders. Proposals for the consultation will be brought to the committee’s next meeting on 17 October, with a view to launching in November. It is likely that the consultation will then run until January, with analysis and final drafting of outcomes in February/March. Anticipated outcomes would be in March/April. The consultation will incorporate all outcomes of this project, so will cover both the classification work and the wider degree standards programme.
5. UUK will report fully on planned next steps, and will bring detail of the outcomes of the research strand for this project to the next UKSCQA meeting on 17 October.