

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

### **Minutes of meeting held on Wednesday 17 October 2018 at OfS offices, Finlaison House, London – FINAL**

#### **Attendees:**

Professor Andrew Wathey (Chair, Northumbria University)  
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)  
Alex Bols (GuildHE)  
Gavin Campbell (Department for the Economy, NI)  
Alison Cook (SFC)  
Amatey Doku (NUS)  
Ben Elger (OIA)  
Will Hammonds (UUK)  
Susan Lapworth (OfS) – by phone  
Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)  
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (University of Lancaster)  
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)  
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)  
David S Jones (Queen's University Belfast)  
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)

#### **QAA (for item 4):**

Maureen McLaughlin (by phone)

#### **Apologies:**

Emma Atkins (student representative)  
Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)  
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)  
John Rushforth (CUC)  
Arti Saraswat (AoC)

**Secretariat:** Scott Court (by phone), Jessica Bacon (by phone), Gemma Tombs.

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

1. The Chair welcomed members and noted apologies, as listed above. He welcomed Charlotte Gorse as a new member of the committee. He also advised the committee that Alison Cook would be leaving her role at SFC from the end of November, and thanked her for her contributions to the committee throughout its lifetime.
2. The Chair also noted that due to travel complications, OfS (represented by Susan Lapworth) and two members of the Secretariat (Scott Court and Jess Bacon) were joining by phone. Maureen McLaughlin (QAA Head of Universities and Standards) would also join these colleagues in Bristol to dial into the meeting.

#### **Item 2: Minutes of the last meetings and matters arising**

3. The Chair advised that there were two sets of minutes to review, from the 6 June meeting (UKSC Min 7) and the 3 and 6 September meetings (UKSC Min 8). Both sets of minutes were confirmed as correct records. There were no matters arising.

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

4. SFC noted that quality arrangements in Scotland were still in a stable state and there was nothing new to report in the Scottish quality dimension.
5. HEFCW noted that they are also in a stable state, and had recently had a meeting of their Quality Assessment Committee. A number of current issues had been discussed at that meeting, and HEFCW said that they would raise this under the relevant agenda items.
6. DfENI advised the committee that Northern Ireland's second Annual Provider Review will be run in January/February 2019. Northern Ireland continue to follow the revised operating model for quality assessment as, in the absence of a Minister for the Economy, no changes to the quality and standards arrangements can be approved. In the longer term, DfENI would like to make some slight alterations to how the revised operating model works in Northern Ireland.
7. OfS updated the committee on its current activity during the transitional year before it receives its full powers, which involved continuing to run old processes whilst setting up new OfS arrangements including registering providers. OfS informed the committee that it is beginning to identify patterns in quality and standards arrangements through its registration process, and is starting to use regulatory levers such as enhanced monitoring and specific conditions of registration. OfS is also currently progressing through an organisational restructure process to ensure it has sufficient expertise to meet its needs, which is likely to be completed by the end of 2018.
8. A question was posed to the OfS representative with regards to the publication of the use of regulatory levers on the OfS Register. OfS advised that specific conditions of registration were to be published except in exceptional circumstances (which was thought to be unlikely for quality and standards issues), but enhanced monitoring arrangements would not be made public.
9. The Chair advised the committee that following the previous committee meeting, a meeting had now been set up between the Chair and the funding bodies/regulators of the four UK nations. This was scheduled for the end of November.

**Item 4: Quality Code advice and guidance**

10. The Chair introduced an item on the Quality Code advice and guidance (Annex B to paper UKSC 18/18), which had been submitted for the committee's review prior to this meeting. He thanked the QAA for its detailed and time-consuming work undertaken on behalf of the committee and the sector in developing the third level of the Code. The Chair advised that further revisions would be necessary before the launch of the Code on 29 November, but that the version submitted for this meeting showed substantial progress and engagement across the sector.
11. The Chair noted that the current presentation of the advice and guidance was inconsistent with the messaging agreed at the beginning of the Quality Code review, in which the UKSCQA logo would be present on documentation to note its oversight of this review. It was agreed that messaging should remain consistent throughout the full review in order to avoid fragmentation and confusion.

**Action: QAA to work with Secretariat to ensure appropriate use of the UKSCQA logo on the advice and guidance documents and Quality Code webpages.**

12. The Chair then invited Douglas Blackstock of the QAA to provide an update on progress since the last meeting, and Douglas noted that Maureen McLaughlin (Head of Universities and Standards) would be joining shortly by phone. QAA welcomed comments from the Chair regarding the volume of work undertaken over the past few months, and noted the hard work of sector colleagues in the writing and reading groups for the advice and guidance. QAA also agreed that further comments from committee members would be welcome, but that detailed notes rather than high-level comments were necessary at this point. Maureen McLaughlin joined the meeting at this point (by phone) and provided the committee with an update on activity over the past few months, including engagement across all four UK nations.
13. HEFCW advised that, due to their consultation obligations, they had undertaken a further 'soft' consultation on the advice and guidance with the Learning and Teaching PVCs in Wales, and received comments within a few days. Responses were broadly positive, but feedback was provided around the need for consistency in terms of writing styles, the extent to which certain elements might be open to interpretation and therefore confusing, the engagement of students throughout the consultation, and the somewhat inconsistent use of reflective questions which were thought to be helpful. HEFCW advised that they had detailed comments from the Welsh L&T PVCs, and would share these with QAA.  
**Action: HEFCW to share Quality Code feedback with QAA.**
14. Questions were raised by some members about the extent to which the role of the Quality Code in England might be open to confusion or misinterpretation, as providers are welcome to follow the proposals contained in the advice and guidance but are not required to do so and will not be tested against them in the English review method. QAA agreed that there was an opportunity for further clarity to be provided via content on the main website, and that QAA were conscious of the need for the sector to understand the advisory of the third level of the Code. OfS requested sight of the wording which specified the role of the advice and guidance in England, as it is essential that English providers understand that they are not required to follow the advice and guidance.  
**Action: QAA to confirm wording and presentation of issues specific to the English regulatory context with OfS.**
15. John Sawkins suggested that, following the feedback from HEFCW, it might be helpful for Scottish Learning and Teaching PVCs to also have the opportunity for a final short 'soft consultation', and QAA agreed that this could help with understanding of the advice and guidance. It was further suggested that it might be advantageous to undertake the same approach in Northern Ireland, and the NI and Scottish sector representatives agreed to take forward a short and targeted 'soft consultation' with key institutional stakeholders in these nations. QAA and the Chair both noted that this would need to be undertaken very quickly in order to ensure that QAA have sufficient time to respond to feedback before the 29 November launch.  
**Action: NI and Scottish sector representatives to approach Learning and Teaching PVCs (or appropriate alternates) for their review of the current advice and guidance, and provide feedback to QAA.**
16. The committee agreed that, following responses to the feedback noted above, the advice and guidance looked sensible and helpful for providers and students. Members noted the importance of revising the advice and guidance to reduce repetition through copy-editing, whilst ensuring that valuable content still remained. QAA confirmed that they were reviewing the advice and guidance with the intent of reducing repetition and highlighted that this had been a priority throughout.

17. The committee confirmed that further revisions (to respond to the issues raised above) were necessary before the Code could be launched on 29 November.
18. It was also agreed that the Chair should receive a final version of the advice and guidance before its launch, and that QAA should consider whether it needed to have a last opportunity to review the advice and guidance, and also to review how it would be presented to the sector via the interactive website.  
**Action: QAA to co-ordinate with Secretariat in providing a timeline for the Chair to review the final version of the advice and guidance.**
19. The committee also discussed timelines for review of the Code advice and guidance following comments from NUS and QAA, noting that the expectations and practices were confirmed for the foreseeable future. The committee agreed that it and the QAA could collect feedback on how providers use the advice and guidance throughout 2019 and consider whether any further revisions might be necessary at the end of 2019. One possible option proposed by the Chair included a short annual review of the advice and guidance, with a more substantial review scheduled on a triennial basis. QAA also noted that future priorities involved making the Code available via an interactive mobile application, and providing videos to make it more accessible to students.

#### **Item 5: Advance Higher Education external examining strategic report**

20. The Chair introduced the report from Advance Higher Education (UKSC 18/19) which summarised the activity undertaken throughout the second year of this project, which was designed to improve comparability of degree standards through professional development for external examiners. At the request of GuildHE, the Chair clarified that the committee had strategic oversight of this work, but that the outcomes and recommendations were AHE owned rather than UKSCQA owned. The role of the committee was to help set the strategic direction of the project through its feedback.
21. The committee agreed that substantial progress had been made throughout year 2 and the report reflected excellent work throughout the year. Feedback was provided on the importance of ensuring that any external examiner professional development programme is relevant for small and specialist institutions. Members were agreed that work to support the external examiner system continued to be of value, including in Scotland, which was no longer involved in the AHE project. SFC suggested that other sector-led approaches to supporting the system might also be explored in the future.
22. Members queried the extent to which the longer-term recommendations from the strategic report were appropriately framed, noting that the recommendations were for institutions to consider and for the sector to take forward, potentially via UUK and GuildHE, and that the project needed to be mindful of institutional autonomy in this area. HEFCW also asked whether alignment between the broader degree standards programme could be improved in terms of the recommendations, and UUK agreed to work with AHE on the framing of its longer-term recommendations.  
**Action: UUK to provide feedback to AHE on the committee's response to its recommendations.**
23. OfS noted that it was important to consider the history of the project, which was developed following the sector's feedback that the external examining system was an essential part of the UK's approach to ensuring comparability and maintenance of standards. As evidence showed that the divergence in approaches across the external examining system meant that it was not fully meeting the sector's needs, a supportive programme of work was felt to

be necessary. OfS recognised that issues around standards for the sector are sector issues, but that it would be helpful for regulators to see the sector taking action to improve consistency around external examining and algorithms.

24. The committee confirmed that it was content with the detailed year 3 proposals put forward by AHE. It was agreed that next steps on this project would involve the relevant funders (OfS, HEFCW and DfENI) reflecting on the feedback provided by the committee and confirming the detailed activity to be undertaken in year 3 of the contract.

**Action: OfS, HEFCW and DfENI to confirm activity to be undertaken to AHE.**

#### **Item 6: Transparent, consistent and fair academic standards**

25. The Chair invited Will Hammonds of UUK to introduce two papers on this item (18/20 and 18/21), which included a draft report on the findings from the analysis and engagement with the sector on this programme of work, and a set of consultation proposals for the sector to consider in responding to the issues raised. There were three key areas to consider in reviewing these papers: the shape of the consultation, the recommendations, and the content of the report, and suggested that these should be considered in turn.
26. The committee discussed the shape of the consultation, and agreed that it was important to present this as a piece which had UK-wide commitment. It was agreed that questions should be pitched at the UK level, enabling providers across all nations to respond to the detailed proposals within the consultation. National distinctions could then be picked up through the consultation analysis.
27. The two-year timetable for providers to make appropriate changes in line with the proposal was agreed to be appropriate, although the impact could be seen before then.
28. The Chair noted that there is a clear public and media interest in the rise in upper degrees awarded and the maintenance of standards, and it is important that this work responds appropriately and demonstrates the sector's leadership.
29. The committee then discussed the content of the report and the analytical approach employed. UUK noted that the modelling was an attempt to explain why increases have been observed over time, and looked at externally observed inputs but not internally observable inputs which sit at the provider level and are largely qualitative. There is a need to generate evidence within institutions to address this, and the outcomes from the work need to make this clear.
30. The committee further discussed issues in relation to public perception of grade inflation, and how the sector might best demonstrate its leadership in this area.

#### **Item 7: International strategic engagement and transnational education**

31. The Chair introduced paper 18/22, which summarised the conclusion of the QAA TNE contract with the four funders/regulators and set out each of their positions on TNE moving forward. The Chair noted that following this paper, there were two key questions to consider: how best to communicate the UK-wide position on TNE, and next steps on the originally planned review of Malaysia.
32. HEFCW provided an update to the committee on its TNE-related discussions at its recent Quality Assessment Committee meeting. HEFCW's QAC had advised that this was an area

of particular risk and encouraged HEFCW to continue to undertake some TNE review activity.

33. It was agreed that as the review of Malaysia has been publicised nationally and internationally, that it would be sensible to continue this review. One option might be to fund activity via provider subscriptions; in England providers will not be required to pay subscriptions for TNE but may choose to do so.
34. The committee discussed how the UK-wide position on TNE might best be communicated nationally and internationally, noting that this is an area of potential confusion.
35. UUK noted the importance of ensuring that external oversight of TNE is appropriately positioned, and agreed to work with QAA in setting up a working group to develop oversight arrangements.
36. QAA agreed that they will work with UUK and UUKi to take a decision on a review of Malaysia by the end of 2018.

**Action: QAA to update on progress on Malaysia review at next UKSCQA meeting.**

#### **Item 8: Update on strategic workshop actions**

37. The Chair introduced paper 18/23, which set out actions undertaken following the committee's strategic workshop in May 2018. These related to the development of a Memorandum of Understanding, a review of the current committee membership, and arrangements for an independent secretariat.
38. The Chair advised the committee that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was currently in development and would be discussed at the meeting between the Chair and Chief Executive representatives from each of the funders/regulators at the end of November. An update following this will be brought to the next committee meeting.
39. The MoU will set out the broad remit and high-level principles of the committee. It will be signed by the four funders/regulators, UUK, GuildHE, and NUS, and will confirm UKSCQA's parentage, as the absence of any broader governance has posed some challenges to the running of the committee.
40. A proposal for future Secretariat arrangements will be developed alongside the full MoU.
41. GuildHE asked the Chair and Secretariat for an update on filling student representative membership gaps. The Secretariat noted that both student representative roles now needed to be filled, and that NUS had put forward some proposals for the Chair's consideration. It was agreed that this would be prioritised in order to allow for student representation at the next committee meeting.

**Action: Chair, Secretariat and NUS to review and confirm nominations for two new student representatives.**

#### **Item 9: AOB**

42. HEFCW raised one issue under the Any Other Business item, which related to QAA's invitation to the funders/regulators and to the Chair to discuss its proposed Centre for Academic Integrity. HEFCW proposed that this should be an issue for the committee to consider in its entirety before individual discussions with funders/regulators.

43. The Chair invited QAA to respond, and QAA agreed that it was an issue for the committee's consideration. QAA's Academic Integrity Group are currently reviewing QAA's proposal for the centre, and are working closely with Lord Storey who has a particular interest in this area. The Chair noted the importance of research engagement, and QAA confirmed that they had met with David Sweeney of Research England to discuss the proposal.
44. Following this discussion, members agreed that a response to issues relating to academic integrity (e.g. plagiarism, essay mills) should be discussed first at the UK and co-regulatory level via the committee. QAA agreed to provide a proposal with options to address academic integrity issues to the next UKSCQA meeting.
45. **Action: QAA to bring a proposed response(s) to academic integrity issues to the next committee meeting.**
46. There were no further items of business.