

UKSC Workshop - Future of the Quality Code, 22 June 2017

Introduction

1. The UKSC held a workshop on 22 June 2017 to consider the question – ‘what is the future of the Quality Code and what development is needed to ensure it is fit for purpose in a new regulatory landscape?’
2. The workshop considered three main questions: what are the big issues/challenges we need to tackle; what is the future vision for the Code; and, how should the Code be developed to ensure it meets the sector’s needs over the next 10 years and beyond? The discussion encompassed consideration of the role of a UK-wide Quality Code in a new regulatory landscape, its accessibility for new audiences, and any gaps or areas of duplication.

Areas of discussion

Agreed principles

3. The committee agreed on a number of core principles that the Code represents. The Code acts as a ‘UK unifier’, articulating the standards that underpin higher education in the UK. It represents a core tool of co-regulation (which is located in the UKSC), and is owned by both by the sector and key regulatory and funding bodies from UK HE. The stability the Code offers across the UK, even whilst the nations adopt different regulatory approaches, is very useful. The international recognition the Code attracts is also important.
4. It was further agreed that the Code acts as a ‘cornerstone’, to support accountability, compliance and good practice. It plays a role in ensuring baseline standards are met – the Expectations of the Code form part of the baseline regulatory requirements. This role will become even more important as the sector diversifies, and the Code will need to ensure it is accessible to a wider range of audiences.
5. It is recognised that some providers use the Code to support enhancement, this is the approach in Scotland, where the Code underpins enhancement-focussed quality assessment. However, there have been concerns that the Code can inhibit innovation this was never its intention and more emphasis on the high-level principles of the Code, rather than the indicators, could make its purpose clearer.

Issues/challenges for future development

6. The Code is used differently across national regulatory frameworks and this could provide challenges for its future development. As noted above, in Scotland the Code is embedded within providers in an enhancement based framework, including 5 yearly reviews. Wales is moving to a similar system as operated in England, with a framework

which currently has some elements under consultation. In Northern Ireland there is no legislative requirement to assess quality and standards so the focus at an institutional level is on best practice.

7. In England the future regulatory context is uncertain given the imminent implementation of the OfS. Current frameworks that are in place (TEF and APR) incorporate outcome-focussed assessments and don't necessarily link well with the Code as currently framed. For the Code to have continued relevance in England it must demonstrate its linkages with the new regulatory framework, and how its use can lead providers to better outcomes

8. A further challenge is ensuring the Code is relevant to the needs of a diverse audience. Given the changes the sector faces over the next few years, the Code must address a wider audience than ever before, encompassing Alternative Providers, students, and governing bodies. It was agreed the latter is a key stakeholder group, given the governing body's more prominent role in assuring the full range of risk (including academic risk) at a provider. New audiences such as governors and students need to be able to access and understand the core principles of the Code easily, and know how to access more detail if needed.

9. It was agreed there should be high-level accessible version of the Code that allows a range of audiences to get to grips with the core elements of the Code quickly and easily. There should be obvious navigable links for those who want to access the underlying detail. The detail will still be needed for quality practitioners and academics who need more in-depth documentation to assist with approaches within a provider. The focus on high level principles does not negate the possibility of accompanying documents or guidance that support a range of approaches across providers, or across different nations.

10. It was also agreed that some refinement and streamlining of subject benchmark statements is needed, and indeed some statements are now redundant and should be removed completely.

11. Although it was acknowledged that there is a need for some stability in the Code's content to ensure it provides an anchor for quality in a shifting UK context, there are agendas that are a high priority within UK HE that could be amplified within the Code – specifically: employability; new models of learning and use of data to support teaching; and work-based learning (including apprenticeships).

12. The Code should also seek to avoid duplication with other regulatory frameworks and guidance, for example the current Part C of the Code has some duplication with CMA guidance. Any development of the Code must bear in mind national contexts though as some regulatory guidance (i.e. the OIA best practice framework) is not UK-wide.

Next steps

13. It was noted that the UKSC has a crucial role to play in providing independent, and co-regulatory strategic oversight of the Code and any planned development. It can provide a UK-wide viewpoint that ensures any duplication is avoided and a UK-wide approach is taken

wherever possible. The UKSC can maintain a strong narrative on the importance of the Code and its relevance to new regulatory frameworks. This will be important for future communications with the OfS CEO and Board, with DfE, and with other key stakeholders.

14. The UKSC should also consider the linkages between the Code's development and the other projects that it oversees. For example, is more signposting needed in the LFHE resources that will be developed in year two of this project, on the role of governing bodies in ensuring engagement with the Code? There are also many links between the HEA External Examining work and the utility of the Code. The HEA project has a clear focus on equipping external examiners to be maintainers of national standards. In that case, examiners need frameworks that provide confidence in the standards in their subject areas – is the Code sufficient for this purpose? The QAA and HEA have identified a need for closer working in year two of the HEA's project and the UKSC supports this.

15. The committee requested a plan of work for how the review of the Code will be executed over the next two years, including rationale for revising the Code, objectives for the programme of work, and expected outcomes. The committee would wish to review this at its next meeting in the autumn. It is important the Code continues to be sector-owned and there will need to be a consultation on the proposed changes. This consultation will need to be aligned with the Regulatory Framework consultation in England wherever possible.

16. The future plan of work should include the following:

- a. undertake UK-wide review of the Code to ensure it remains relevant for sector and regulator needs, encompassing all HE provision, and is developed with a clear understanding of the different national contexts that the Code operates in.
- b. make progress on accessibility, considering engagement with user groups (e.g. student representatives)
- c. consider how a review of the subject benchmark statements could be taken forward – with a goal of better comparability, including removal of redundant statements
- d. revise the overview document to explain the expectations and how they should be used – a new clearer approach to articulate the principles of the Code
- e. explore linkages with the other projects under UKSC oversight.

17. The committee and other attendees were thanked for an extremely productive session. Members will be updated on the progress of this work at the next UKSC meeting.