

UK-wide Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of 20 September 2017 meeting at HEFCE Offices, Finlaison House, London

In attendance

Members:

Professor Andrew Wathey (Chair, Northumbria University)
Emma Atkins (University of Manchester)
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Professor David Jones (Queen's University Belfast)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Will Hammonds (UUK)
Celia Hunt (HEFCW)
Mike Lambourne (CMA)
Susan Lapworth (HEFCE)
Gareth Lindop (NUS) (in place of Amatey Doku)
Professor Lorna Milne (University of St Andrews)
Ali Orr (Professions Together)
Luke Renwick (Sheffield Hallam University)
Jon Reynard (Arts University Bournemouth)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Arti Saraswat (AOC)
Claire Thompson (Department for the Economy, NI)

Secretariat:

Scott Court (Secretary)
Jess Bacon (Clerk)
Sheila Wolfenden (Clerk)
Gemma Tombs (HEA project lead)

Apologies

Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Alison Cook (SFC)
Amatey Doku (NUS)
Professor Andy Westwood (University of Manchester, University of Wolverhampton)
Alison Wheaton.

Item 1: Chair's welcome and apologies

1. The Chair welcomed members. Apologies were given for Ben Calvert, Alison Cook, Amatey Doku, Professor Andy Westwood and Alison Wheaton.

Item 2: Minutes of the last meeting, matters arising and discussion of Terms of Reference and membership

2. The minutes of the 20 January 2017 meeting were agreed as an accurate record; members were content with the amendments that had been circulated. All actions, including adding the funders' update as a standing item on all future agendas, had been actioned. There were no matters arising.

3. The Terms of Reference (ToR) had been updated with the current membership, to include Emma Atkins and Luke Renwick as student representatives; Amatey Doku as the NUS representative replacing Sorana Vieru; and Amanda Chetwynd as the alternate QARSAC representative.

4. The Committee discussed amendments to the ToR. The Committee felt that these were now out of date in certain respects, as a result of: the changed purpose of the Committee; the changes in the significance of the Committee's role regarding standards in light of the HERA; the need for the separation of the Committee from Government; the need to map relationships with other policy elements. It was agreed it would be useful to revisit the Committee's place in the regulatory frameworks for each nation. The Chair noted these as helpful directions for future development of the Terms of Reference, in particular this document should reiterate the Committee's mission to maintain a co-regulatory space, rather than be beholden to any particular administration's agenda. It is important to maintain a sense of separation, but equally, given the scale of change in one of the devolved nations, England, it is important that the Committee engage with regulatory change within its remit.

5. It would also be timely to review the membership of the Committee, suggestions included increasing the alternative provider representation, and ensuring a greater balance between institutional based representatives and sector agencies. Confirmation of what would constitute a quorum for the Committee should also be included (based on a balance of sector-based/funding body representatives as well as a numerical minimum). It was agreed the Secretariat would produce a new draft of the terms of reference, taking members' comments into consideration. Input from all funding bodies will be needed to ensure this document is framed correctly.

ACTION: Secretariat to draft proposed terms of reference, in collaboration with the funding bodies of all nations, and circulate to members for comment.

6. Following on from these discussions the Chair also noted that given the Committee is about to lead on some substantial and high profile programmes of work, there is a need for the group to have a more tangible and accessible presence. This will be achieved in one way by an online presence for the Committee and its work. The Secretariat have been tasked with creating a new website for the Committee, where minutes and papers, as appropriate can be published and freely accessible.

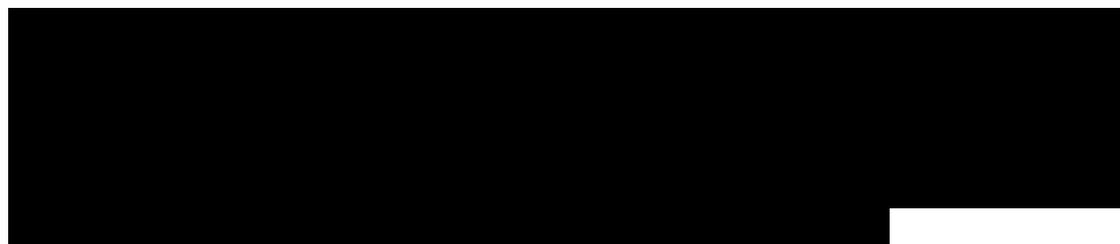
7. The Chair commented that, so far, meetings had been held in London, for convenience, but that he was open to holding meetings elsewhere and would accept the preferences of the Committee. Suggestions and comments should be directed to the Chair or Secretariat.

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

Scotland

8. Alison Cook was not able to attend the meeting, but had produced a report from which Lorna Milne updated members.

9. The SFC had completed a review of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in May 2017 and had published revised guidance on quality to Scottish HEIs in July. The review did not result in any changes to the structure of the QEF or the enhancement-led approach. The Scottish Government and SFC remain committed to the enhancement-led approach to quality embodied in the QEF, which, in conjunction with Outcome Agreements are the means of negotiating policy objectives and directing funding. Participating in the QEF remains the mandatory approach to quality assurance for the HE sector in Scotland.



Northern Ireland

11. DfENI provided an update for Northern Ireland. Operationally in terms of quality assessment, it was 'business as usual'. However, due to the current lack of a NI Executive, no major policy decisions are possible, and any major divergence from existing policy will be problematic. Therefore, the changes in England are likely to cause issues for policy in Northern Ireland. It was not known how long this vacuum would continue. On other issues, Northern Irish institutions are currently considering whether they will enter the TEF. Following on from the Scottish update, providers in Northern Ireland are continuing with HEA subscriptions, but with reservations.

Wales

12. HEFCW reminded the Committee that under the 2015 Act in Wales, the resulting regulatory framework meant that HEFCW now has oversight of the quality in all provision, not just that funded by HEFCW. Wales is continuing to develop a quality assurance framework in this context. It was built into the Act that HEFCW must consult on all quality proposals. They are currently in consultation on gateway entries, and also have a quality assurance process in piloting stage. HEFCW further noted they still have a requirement that Welsh providers undergo regular reviews from the QAA.

England

13. HEFCE noted that the Higher Education and Research Bill has been enacted since the last meeting of the Committee. There is still some secondary legislation to be navigated, and this may be more complex than initially envisaged given the parliamentary timetable is now

congested with Brexit issues. The OfS Chair has been appointed, Sir Michael Barber, and the new CEO has been confirmed as Nicola Dandridge. Chris Millward has recently been appointed as the new Director for Access and Participation. The Shadow Board is mostly in place and met last week. On 1 January 2018 the OfS Board will gain legal status, and the OfS will begin operating on 1 April 2018. To support the development of the regulatory framework a number of separate consultations will be issued shortly in the following areas: Regulatory Framework proposals; designated data body; designated quality body; DAPs and UT criteria; and Registration fees for the OfS. The Committee commented on the demand on resource across the sector this level of consultation documentation will entail. The Committee further noted the need to ensure effective student input into OfS development and ongoing operation, HEFCE confirmed that there will be student representatives on the OfS Board and these vacancies are currently being filled. The CMA also presented on the issue of student engagement at the last OfS Board meeting. There is a strong commitment from the OfS to ensure student engagement is the focus of all discussions.

Item 4: Regulatory framework consultation

14. The Chair informed members that the consultation would run from mid-October to 22 December 2017. The new framework would be operational from 1 April 2017. The Committee agreed that it should submit a response as a formal entity to the consultation, focused on those areas within the Committee's remit. The Committee is well-placed to take a UK-wide view of the proposals and ensure UK-wide issues are highlighted in its response.

15. A meeting, or teleconference will be scheduled in mid-November to facilitate discussion on the Committee's response. As Susan Lapworth has been closely involved in the development of the OfS proposals she will not participate in this discussion.

ACTION: Secretariat to facilitate an optional teleconference or meeting if availability allows, to discuss a formal response to the OfS consultations.

Item 5: Quality Code Review

16. The Chair commented that the workshop on the Code in June had been useful in terms of agreeing key principles for the Quality Code review moving forward. There were no comments or questions arising from the workshop report (17/6).

17. Moving on to the QAA's paper on the review (17/7), the Chair introduced the proposal for the QAA to coordinate the next steps of the consultation on behalf of the Committee. Cathy Kerfoot (QAA) was welcomed to discussions at this point. She thanked everyone who had contributed to getting the review proposal to its current status, noting the extensive work that various parties had contributed over the summer.

18. Douglas Blackstock provided some context for the proposed changes, commenting that the proposals represent a very different way of reviewing the Code – starting at the highest level, and asking what do we want to achieve in the future for how the Code is used. Key issues for the future direction of the Code were how it would continue to operate at a UK-wide level, and how it would meet the needs of institutions, funding bodies, students,

and academic practitioners amongst others. The proposed revisions are progressive and forward thinking, and focus on student outcomes.

19. An initial period of consultation is proposed until December 2017, which will focus on the high-level expectations and practices of the revised Code. A longer period of work, over the next two years, will further develop the supplementary guidance and further practices that sit underneath this top level. The Committee were asked for their views on these initial proposals – particularly on whether the planned wording and structure is appropriate for a UK-wide approach.

20. Representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had some feedback on the specific language used, particularly the use of the term 'behaviours'. [REDACTED]

In Scotland in particular, there will be great interest in the supplementary practices and how these can support an enhancement-based approach. All members agreed there was a need for sensitive presentation that emphasised the UK-wide principles and planned approach for implementation across the UK. The QAA noted that the planned consultation would draw on expertise from across the nations.

21. The proposals allow flexibility for different nations and their regulatory requirements, under a top-level strategic UK-wide approach. Members had some concerns this undermined the UK-wide nature of the Code. Funding body representatives were supportive of agreeing high-level principles and focussing communication of the Code at this level, in order to support and continue the Code's UK relevance.

22. Members further discussed how communication around the review should decouple the review from the upcoming regulatory change in England. Although the English policy context is a strong concern, the consultation is a natural evolution of an ongoing programme of work initiated by the QAA, and adopted by the Committee at its initiation in autumn 2016. The Committee should be mindful though of the tone of the OfS shadow Board's discussions so far – the Committee cannot assume that OfS will automatically follow HEFCE in adopting the Code, there is a need for the Committee to communicate the Code's importance and use in a future regulatory landscape. The UK-wide relevance of the Code will be crucial to doing this, and a focus on the high-level principles is likely to be effective.

23. The Committee noted the focus on high-level principles is likely to be useful in terms of accessibility to new audiences, in particular for students and governing bodies. It is to be hoped that this approach would also encourage more discussion and academic debate at the senior management level, when engaging with the revised expectations.

24. The proposed start date for the consultation was approximately 9 October. A final draft would be worked up and circulated to the Committee for comment during the next two weeks. Douglas Blackstock thanked all members for their comments.

25. The Chair thanked the team at QAA for their hard work in getting the draft to its current form. Cathy Kerfoot left the meeting at this point.

Item 6: Project updates on degree standards (including support for external examiners, and

degree classification algorithms); support for governing bodies; and transnational education and international engagement

26. Jess Bacon gave a summary of paper 17/8, an overview of progress on all three of the projects for which the Committee acts as steering group. Updates for the LFHE and QAA projects were relatively straightforward, but [REDACTED] the HEA project [REDACTED] required more discussion.

Higher Education Academy (HEA)

The professional development strand

27. The HEA's report stated that all three approaches to professional development (institutional, regional and online) had their strengths but that it was too early to give firm conclusions on the longer-term impact of each strand. The institution-based training appeared to have the most potential in terms of sustainability and acceptance across the sector. Regional training was perhaps not the most effective in terms of a sustainable model, but had proved valuable in encouraging cross-institutional discussion. Small-scale piloting of the online model had commenced and initial findings are that it will offer an equivalent experience to the face to face training. HEA's recommendation is that all three strands should continue for another year in order to fully evaluate the effectiveness of each strand.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The calibration strand

Members noted the project's progress in piloting calibration approaches in year one. Some useful pockets of exploration had been initiated and were proving fruitful

31. Other members commented that this strand of the project had been intended to fulfil a more exploratory function. The calibration piloting was designed to test if externalising an examiner's internal assessment/review processes led to more comparable approaches. A leap to scalability across the sector may be a leap too far for the project as currently framed, but the current small scale activity can still help inform discussions of what can and can't work in this area. The Committee concluded that it would be more appropriate for this strand to focus on concrete and tangible outcomes, such as case studies and toolkits that could be taken away and implemented by subject associations or departments.

HEA presentation

32. A presentation on the project was then given by Geoff Stoakes of the HEA, who reiterated the findings from the final report submitted to the Committee. In his view, calibration is a key area for tackling the comparability of degree standards. The Chair summarised the feedback of the Committee for Geoff's benefit, and indicated some reframing may be needed for the scope of the proposed work in year 2. The funding bodies would provide full feedback to the HEA following the meeting, and there may be a need to engage with the sub group to ensure training materials are pitched at the right level and respond to the Committee's concerns. Geoff Stoakes was thanked for his presentation and left the meeting.

33. The secretariat confirmed that the next steps would be for the funding bodies to reflect on the feedback and recommendations offered by the Committee, and to decide the scope of the work in both strands for year two.

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE)

34. Jess Bacon introduced the discussion. LFHE had completed their baselining stage in the spring. Activity since then had focussed on the development of support for governing bodies, with a range of resources, including inductions and webinars, to be available on an open basis to April 2018. The project had found that providers in the pilot group were coping well with the quality assurance process.

Some members of the Committee would have welcomed more explicit guidance on the specific steps a body should follow in the assurance process. The Secretariat agreed to discuss with the LF team how these concerns could be addressed in the next phase of the project.

35. HEFCE updated the Committee that for England, the scope of the contract was being extended to include alternative providers. The Committee felt this was a sensible way forward.

Quality Assurance Agency

36. Douglas Blackstock commented that a more comprehensive strategic report on the transnational work would be available to members at the next 2018 meeting. Strategic analysis of the work to date had not yet started, due to the relatively late start in agreeing the contract and in initiating the practical activities of the project. The project was not discussed further due to time constraints.

UUK/Guild HE

37. UUK reported that the project had revealed a genuine interest in understanding degree algorithms practice in the sector, exploring why changes had been made by providers, and why there was some lack of transparency. The project had found that there was varying practice in the sector, but within a bounded range. The report has not sought to set out a range of numerical algorithms, but has highlighted what is acceptable variance and what may be practice on the margins. The report recommends that the sector review practice in this area, working under key principles of transparency and accountability (how and why particular algorithms were designed).

38. The UUK noted that this report and subsequent engagement with the sector can start to address any concerning practice in algorithms, but this is only one indication in the larger and more complex area of comparability of standards. There is further work to be done on the drivers of the perceived issue of grade inflation. This should incorporate an examination of inflationary practices, and also how classification frameworks are used within institutions. The Committee has a role to consider how the different projects within its remit can work together to respond to some of these issues.

39. The Committee thanked UUK and GuildHE for an interesting exploration of some of the underpinning issues in grade inflation. It was discussed that the report signalled a need for further work, particularly in the context of the sector being seen to be engaged and proactive in responding to sector concerns in the area of comparability of standards. This is a shared space of interest to many stakeholders, but the UKSCQA is well placed to respond in many areas of this work.

Item 7: Any Other Business

23. No other business was raised.

Item 8: Date of next meeting

24. The next meeting would be held in January/February 2018 (tbc).

Actions

Not the original document. This document has been edited for publication.

UKSC Min/3

Action	Ref	Owner
Draft new version of ToR and circulate to Committee	Para 5	Secretariat
Arrange teleconference/meeting to discuss response to consultation	Para 15	Secretariat