

UK-wide Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of 23 November 2017 meeting at HEFCE Offices, Finlaison House, London

In attendance

Members:

Professor Andrew Wathey (Chair, Northumbria University)
Emma Atkins (University of Manchester), via phone
Douglas Blackstock (QAA), via phone
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Alison Cook (SFC)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Amatey Doku (NUS)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Will Hammonds (UUK)
Celia Hunt (HEFCW)
Ali Orr (Professions Together)
Luke Renwick (Sheffield Hallam University)
Jon Reynard (Arts University Bournemouth)
Claire Thompson (Department for the Economy, NI)
Alison Wheaton (independent)

Secretariat:

Scott Court (Secretary)
Jess Bacon (Clerk)

Item 1: Chair's welcome

1. The Chair welcomed members to this special meeting of the Committee. This had initially been set up as an optional meeting for members to discuss UKSCQA's response to the OfS regulatory framework consultation. Members had agreed at the previous meeting in September that the Committee should seek to submit a formal response, focussing on those areas of the consultation within its remit. Given recent email discussions between members, some time would also be spent in discussion of the proposed next steps in degree standards for the Committee.

Item 2: response to the regulatory framework consultation

2. The Committee reiterated the principles on which it would respond to the consultation, namely, it would seek to respond to matters only within its remit, with a focus on cross-border issues that reflect its status as a UK-wide committee. The Chair further noted that it had been suggested at the last meeting that the Committee would not respond separately to the Designated Quality Body consultation, given potential issues with conflicts

of interest within the Committee's membership. Should members wish to spend any time on this area in today's discussions, the Chair, Scott Court and Douglas Blackstock would remove themselves from the meeting.

3. The Committee discussed their proposed response to the quality and standards proposals within the documentation, and the related consultation questions.

ACTION: Secretariat to consolidate the Committee's discussions into a proposed response to the consultation, and to circulate to members for comment. Note – this can be found at Annex A.

Item 3: discussion of next steps in the degree standards programme of work

4. The Chair thanked those who had contributed to the discussion so far. He also extended the thanks of the Committee to the secretariat, who were working hard to support the Committee and its work despite a challenging operating environment in their home council.

5. The Chair noted the most recent proposal for taking this work forward, submitted by UUK, and commented that the main goals and parameters of this work were aligned with earlier proposals discussed by the Committee. The main principle for taking this forward should be that the sector itself holds responsibility for standards, and indeed this principle has been written into the HERA. However, it is crucial that the work has some externality: this cannot be a completely self-reflective piece, and it will undermine its robustness if it were to appear so. This could be achieved by including the expertise of bodies such as the ONS. Independent data, such as that held by the analysts at HEFCE, will also be useful. In addition, any outcomes of the work must be future-facing, and therefore representative of the whole of the sector. The working group that takes this work forward should be fully representative and inclusive of segments of the sector outside of established groups.

6. To be considered a robust and independent study of the issues, this programme of work cannot be government-led, but as noted above, it cannot be purely sector-led either. With this in mind, the UKSCQA is well placed to oversee and support the work, and it can also ensure appropriate UK-wide input and discussion.

7. UUK provided some context for the proposals they had submitted, outlining the need to agree a practical structure that can support the initiation of this programme on a timely basis. UUK propose to draw on their existing working relationships with GuildHE and QAA to set up a solid project team, which can utilise existing engagement with the sector and cross-border linkages. UUK recognise the need to ensure the final outcomes are fit for purpose across the diversity of the sector and will extend the core working group appropriately, working with the Committee to do so. They appreciated the need to work collaboratively, and agreed a project structure will be needed whereby the working group seeks the Committee's validation, support and approval throughout the programme of work.

8. The Committee further discussed the drivers for this piece of work, noting there is increased questioning of the reliability of academic standards, and that a robust and credible

response is needed. The Committee agreed that the proposed structure would give the right degree of expertise and accountability to provide this response.

9. The Committee also wished to ensure this work would link appropriately to the other degree standards projects already underway and under the Committee's oversight. In particular, the role the External Examiner project (led by HEA) could play should also be emphasised. This is [REDACTED] supporting practitioners on the ground to apply standards rigorously and consistently, and to consider the developmental and professional needs of academic staff.

10. [REDACTED]

11. The Committee agreed that the programme of work should seek to understand the expectations of stakeholders in this area (such as ministers, students, employers). Further it should make explicit the protections that are already in place to maintain the comparability of standards - namely the external examiner system, degree algorithms, and public availability of information. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

13. In conclusion, the Committee agreed that the work would be UK-wide, with oversight from UKSCQA, and full input from the four funding body/regulator representatives on cross-border considerations. It was noted that any recommendations arising from this work would still require full discussion within each funding body/regulator as to how any implementation of national frameworks might be taken forward.

14. UUK agreed to review the detail in their proposals, based on the discussions today, and to circulate another draft for discussion. They would also take forward the establishment of the working group.

ACTION: UUK to redraft proposals based on feedback and principles agreed at this meeting.

15. The Chair thanked everyone for a useful discussion. He also commented that exchanges around the degree standards work had raised some issues in terms of the Committee’s ways of working and how it achieves collaborative outcomes. He proposed that some time be spent on this at a future meeting of the Committee.

Item 4: Any Other Business

16. No further business was raised.

Item 5: Next meeting of the Committee

17. The next meeting will be on 14 February, Finlaison House, London.

Actions

Action	Ref	Owner
Draft UKSCQA’s response to the regulatory framework consultation questions and circulate to Committee – NOTE – this is attached at Annex A	Para 3	Secretariat
Review the proposals for next steps in degree standards in light of the Committee’s feedback	Para 14	UUK