

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 6th June 2019 at 1.00pm at the Radisson Blu Edwardian Hampshire Hotel, London

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
Eve Alcock (The Student's Union, Bath)
Dr Dee Bird (SFC)
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (Lancaster) [by phone]
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University) [by phone]
Amatey Doku (NUS)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
David S Jones (Queen's University Belfast) [by phone]
Susan Lapworth (OfS)
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE)
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)
Arti Saraswat (AoC)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (UUK)
Jackie Yip (Cardiff Student's Union)

Apologies:

Gordon Ashworth (CMA)
Professor Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
John Rushforth (CUC)

Secretariat:

Gemma Tombs & Joseph Tennant

Item 1: Welcome from the Chair and apologies received

1. In the Chair, Andrew Wathey opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and extended a particular welcome to David Rooney (DfENI), Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE), Jackie Yip (Cardiff University Students' Union) and Charlotte Snelling (UUK), for all of whom this was their first UKSCQA meeting.

Item 2: Approval of the Minutes of previous meetings

2. It was reported that the minutes of the preceding meetings (February and March 2019) were not yet ready to circulate, but that these would be circulated very shortly.

Action: The Secretary will circulate the minutes for the Feb & Mar 2019 meetings to the committee within the next month, alongside minutes for today's meeting.

Item 3: Update from funders/regulators and cross-nation matters

3. The Chair invited the funders/regulators to update the committee on any relevant recent developments.
4. HEFCW reported that it was in the process of updating its Quality Assurance Framework to include bringing in the outcomes from the UKSCQA programme of work on transparent, consistent and fair academic standards.
5. SFC informed the committee that it remained in steady state and as such did not need to update the committee on matters in Scotland.
6. David Rooney introduced himself as the new representative from DfE-NI and briefly described his role, mentioning that he also had responsibility for governance of Higher Education in Northern Ireland. DfE-NI was currently undergoing a minor restructure but there were no substantive changes in arrangements in Northern Ireland in the absence of a higher education minister.
7. OfS reported that it was now nearing the end of the initial process of registering providers. The applications that remained in progress included several of the more difficult cases, where concerns regarding their ability to successfully deliver good student outcomes meant any registration was likely to come with specific conditions imposed, or could even be refused entirely.
8. OfS also commented that, from 1st August 2019, its full range of regulatory powers would come into effect, in accordance with the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. The Department for Education (DfE) in England had also given the OfS powers to designate unregistered providers for student support.
9. HEFCW asked whether this meant the OfS was able to provide cross-border specific designations. OfS replied that the DfE had given the OfS this power for the next 12 months, but the arrangements for beyond that timeframe were not yet confirmed.
10. GuildHE asked whether the quality and standards reviews undertaken by the OfS had thrown up any recurring themes that the UKSCQA might want to consider. OfS highlighted that its Quality Assurance Committee would be looking to see if any such themes emerged. Two members of the QAC also sat on the UKSCQA (in a shared role, meaning only one member attended for each meeting), and these members would identify anything that had a UK-wide bearing and might be pertinent to the UKSCQA's work.

Item 4: Degree Classifications

11. The Chair invited UUK to introduce this item, drawing the committee's attention to the accompanying summary of the outcomes from the recent consultation on degree classifications ([UKSC 19/7](#)), and the proposed degree classifications descriptions

themselves (**Annex A to 19/7**). UUK then briefly summarised the consultation outcomes, commenting that it had received a good number of responses.

12. The committee was then invited to consider the best ways to take forward the work emerging from the recent publication of the Statement of Intent¹, and to confirm its role in the work, and the suitability of the degree classifications descriptions as the basis for this.
13. UUK recommended that the descriptions in their current format should form the basis for future work with providers, funders and regulators based on the level of support shown in the consultation responses and the subsequent minor amendments made to the descriptions in light of some of the consultation feedback.
14. HEFCW suggested that it might be helpful to consider further testing of the descriptions, in particular how users might develop a shared understanding of terms such as “strong understanding” and “exceptional understanding”. It was suggested that this could be achieved through the use of the description as a key reference point in AdvanceHE’s programme of work to support external examiners (undertaken in England, Wales and Northern Ireland), and HEFCW agreed this was an appropriate next step. It was noted that Advance HE had already expressed its support for the descriptions and informed UUK that if a final version was agreed, this would be used as a reference point in its programme of work. QAA also noted that there had already been substantial work undertaken to agree the current wording and that further testing might not be achievable within a reasonable timeframe, given the political pressures in England. The Chair agreed there were other possible dimensions for assessing the effectiveness of the descriptions when used in practice, and it would be helpful to ask institutions to reflect on these as they began to use the descriptions.
15. OfS indicated its support for the statement of intent and classification criteria, and noted that the use of the descriptions in England would be discussed in the subcommittee on England-only matters.
16. On the basis of this discussion, the UKSCQA agreed that the degree classification criteria should be considered ready for adoption and that they should be appended to the existing Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ), and the Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutes in Scotland (FQHEIS). It also agreed that the committee would consider in a year’s time whether there was a need for the descriptions to be reviewed following their implementation.
17. The committee then discussed the introductory wording framing the descriptions. It was agreed that whilst the descriptions themselves were considered to be final and should be used as a key reference point in AdvanceHE’s programme of work to ensure a shared understanding of the key terms amongst external examiners, the introductory wording would need to be revised in order to ensure that it accurately reflected how the descriptions would be used in each of the nations.

Action: Funders/regulators (and sector representatives, as appropriate) to work with UUK, GuildHE and QAA to finalise nation-specific wording describing how the degree classification description will be used in each of the nations.

Action: QAA to append the degree classification description to the FHEQ/FQHEIS once nation-specific introductory wording has been finalised.

¹ “Degree Classification : Transparency, Reliability and Fairness – a Statement of Intent”, May 2019

Action: OfS, HEFCW and DfE-NI to ensure the integration of the degree classification descriptions as a reference point in Advance HE's external examiner professional development.

18. UUK reported that they had received a few enquiries from institutions asking for guidance on how to prepare a degree outcomes statement. It might therefore be useful to prepare guidance and a formal template for this. The committee agreed with this proposal and further agreed that development of the guidance and template should be a priority for the UKSCQA, for development over the summer.
19. The Scottish sector representative noted that in Scotland the Statement of Intent had landed extremely well. It was secured by the existing Quality Enhancement Framework and since this system was up and running already, Scottish institutions did not need to wait for new templates. The committee agreed that implementation would need to differ across the four nations.
20. Independent HE suggested it would be good to see some reference to collaborative partnerships in the guidance, and the committee agreed that this would be helpful.

Action: UKSCQA to develop guidance and a proposed template for institutions to consider as they prepare their degree outcomes statements. This guidance is to recognise nation-specific differences in implementation, and include advice on collaborative partnership arrangements.

21. The committee then moved to the topic of engagement with league tables on the inclusion of numbers of upper degrees awarded in their metrics. At this point sector member Amanda Chetwynd wished to declare an interest, namely that she was on the board of the *Complete Universities Guide*.
22. The Chair noted that representatives of the university league table compilers had recently attended a Government-organised workshop to discuss the impact of league tables on attainment gaps. OfS commented that it had an interest in this as degree inflation was not in the interests of students or employers. HEFCW felt that breaking the link between league tables and degree outcomes would indeed be helpful. GuildHE confirmed that it was not being suggested that degree outcomes should not be published, just that these should be decoupled from league table rankings. The committee agreed that the UKSCQA had a clear shared interest, as demonstrated by the Statement of Intent, to address any issues felt to be undermining the value of degrees. It was therefore agreed that the committee should look to take a role in discussions around the use of upper degrees in league tables, through its Chair as appropriate.

Action: Chair to take forward any future discussions around the use of number of upper degrees awarded in league tables

23. SFC noted that the Scottish minister for education had not identified work to address perceptions of grade inflation as a political priority. However, HEFCW mentioned that its strategic priority letter from the Welsh HE minister had asked HEFCW to take action to address grade inflation and thus they would favour a UK-wide approach to the matter.
24. The committee then discussed options and next steps for developing current conventions on degree classification and norms of practice in algorithm design. The following points were raised in discussion:

- This work should build upon UUK and GuildHE's previous publication on degree classification algorithms
 - It would be important to consider the views of:
 - i. Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) – it was noted that some PSRBs already ask for certain courses to be adjusted, as they did not always feel they matched their profession's qualification requirements.
 - ii. Senior leadership in institutions
 - iii. A diverse array of higher education providers, including independent providers, providers without degree awarding powers, and further education colleges delivering higher education
 - Outputs should seek to take the same approach as the statement of intent, which had set out areas of UK-wide agreement with implementation to be taken forward on a national basis. The endpoint would be for its output to sit next to the FHEQ/FQHEIS
 - Institutional autonomy was a common theme in the consultation responses, and therefore any guidance should refer to 'common parameters' and 'good practice' rather than 'norms'
 - Any guidance should also recognise that there are a variety of approaches to subject-specific or whole-institution algorithms. It was noted that different subjects had different views of what constituted good performance, which made it very challenging to find a single algorithm that met all needs across all subjects and all institutions. The UKSCQA would need to be mindful that there was a question about whether a single, all-purpose algorithm across all subjects at a given degree-awarding body was appropriate.
25. The Chair concluded that good practice needed to be published in order for institutions to be able to respond. He proposed a set of engagements across the Autumn and that a plan should be circulated to the UKSCQA for comment.

Action: UUK and GuildHE to identify next steps for this work in light of the actions agreed above and circulate a proposal to the UKSCQA for comment.

Action: UUK and GuildHE to approach this in the same manner as the Statement of Intent, setting out areas of UK-wide agreement with implementation to be taken forward on a national basis.

26. The committee then considered how and when to review progress against the Statement of Intent across the upcoming academic year 2019-20. GuildHE felt that it would be important to try to define some success criteria, so progress could be specifically measured against this. UUK felt that different metrics might be relevant for different nations, given the differences in recommendations in the Statement of Intent. In England, for example, there were the proposed degree outcomes statements. One could survey English institutions to see how many had completed a degree outcomes statement, and what other changes they had made or steps undertaken. Also, UUK felt it would be useful to hear what challenges the institutions had encountered in doing this.

Action: UUK to propose a timetable for review and success criteria at the September UKSCQA meeting

Item 5: Future developments with the Quality Code

27. The Chair introduced this item, informing the committee that the funders/regulators, himself and the QAA had recently held a meeting to discuss this. At that meeting they had agreed that:
- Quality Code expectations and practices (both core and common) would remain freely available to all, that the FHEQ/FQHEIS would always remain available to all providers irrespective of their QAA subscription status or how future changes to the Code and the FHEQ/FQHEIS were funded.
 - A version of the characteristic statements, and potentially subject benchmark statements, would remain available to all providers regardless of QAA subscription status, although more detailed versions might be restricted to QAA subscribers.
 - The QAA will be considering the views expressed by UKSCQA members as it undertakes its analysis of the responses to its subscription offer consultation.
28. QAA confirmed that anything already produced that was paid for by providers would stay in the public domain as long as it was current. QAA went on to describe some response rates to their consultations, including noting that all members of the Russell Group had indicated they would be taking up core membership. The QAA added that whilst the majority (70%) of respondents had indicated that they wanted QAA advice and guidance documents to remain in the public domain, this was heavily caveated and conditional on the vast majority of providers becoming members.
29. Independent HE was concerned that in the future non-subscribers to the QAA might find themselves at a disadvantage when they came to be reviewed as they wouldn't have access to this wider range of support documentation and suggested procedures. OfS stressed that its new quality & standards reviews had been designed to mitigate against this happening. Reviewers were directed not to assume that just because an institution is found to be following QAA's further advice and guidance that this meant they were satisfying the relevant requirements. Reviewers were also aware that it was possible for providers to meet the Quality Code expectations and practices without following the guidance. OfS explained that its Quality and Standards Review method ensured that institutions were free to use any process or method to meet the requirements and that reviews would focus on outcomes, not adopt a tick-box approach to what processes were in use.

Item 6: Degree standards project: External examiners

30. The Chair noted the report from Advance HE that was submitted to the meeting ([UKSC 19/8](#)). As a detailed analysis of progress with project is being done over the summer, he suggested it might be best to have a fuller discussion of this topic at the UKSCQA's September meeting.
31. It was agreed that the OfS (as contract managers for the Advance HE project) should ask Advance HE for their thoughts on what is needed to scale up the External Examiners initiative and how it could be rolled out.

Action: Advance HE evaluation outcomes to be considered at the September UKSCQA meeting.

Item 7: Transnational Education

32. The Chair invited the QAA to introduce their paper ([UKSC 19/9](#)) and update the committee on Transnational Education (TNE).
33. QAA summarised the content of the paper and indicated they were now waiting to hear back from UUKi on this. QAA also gave a quick update with regard to TNE in Malaysia, where there had been concerns local legislation would restrict access, explaining that it was hoped UK institutions might be granted an exemption from this.

Item 8: Committee matters

34. The Chair invited the Secretary to introduce the paper ([UKSC 19/10](#)) on this item.
35. The Secretary set out how a draft “Memorandum of Understanding between core members of the UKSCQA” (MoU) had been prepared which all the funders/regulators had already fed into. The current version of the MoU was circulated to the committee ([Annex A to 19/10](#)) and comments from members were invited. It remained the intention to have a final version to present to the September meeting of the UKSCQA.
36. The NUS indicated their board were happy with the current draft of the MoU.
37. SFC asked whether UUK had been reviewing the MoU with Universities Scotland. UUK confirmed it did not do policy on behalf of Scotland, and so would be happy to share the MoU with Universities Scotland to hear their views, and also with Universities Wales.
38. The sector representative for Scotland was concerned about ensuring Scottish representation among the permanently co-opted members (as defined in paragraph 12 of the MoU) as he viewed AoC and Independent HE as bodies lacking Scottish members. Independent HE then clarified that they were a UK-wide body with members in all four of the nations, and that it would approach its work in the committee with full consideration for the views of each.

Action: UUK agreed to discuss with Universities Scotland and Universities Wales how they might ensure that policy for Scotland and Wales received sufficient consideration at the UKSCQA.

This action was completed shortly after the meeting. It was agreed by the current proposed signatories that Universities Scotland and Universities Wales should also be listed as signatories in the MoU, with the current sector representatives for Scotland and Wales becoming named representatives on behalf of these organisations.

39. The sector representative for Scotland also suggested that the QAA should be one of the core members defined in the MoU. The Chair noted that the agreed approach, which commanded wide support, was that the core members & signatories of the MoU would consist of the four UK funders/regulators and the principal sector and student representative bodies that represent cross-UK institutional and student interests on the UKSCQA.
40. The sector representative for Scotland queried the language of paragraph 45 of the draft MoU, which he felt was unnecessarily strict in asking members to keep the content of the UKSCQA’s discussions confidential until formal minutes were agreed. As the UKSCQA

was a public body, he felt the committee should be as open as possible about its deliberations and that exceptions to this be only made where there was a compelling reason for confidentiality. The committee agreed it would be sensible to rephrase the wording of paragraph 45 to clarify the committee's work was to be open and transparent and share as many papers as is reasonably possible.

41. It was suggested that the planned updating of the Terms of Reference for the UKSCQA would likely resolve many of the remaining queries members had around the MoU. The secretariat confirmed that work had already begun on revising these.

Action: At the September 2019 meeting, the secretariat will present:

- a) a new draft of the UKSCQA Terms of Reference for members to comment upon,
- b) the final draft of the MoU, with paragraph 45 revised to reflect the discussions above.

Action: Secretariat to update UKSCQA website to publish minutes and papers from recent meetings

Item 9: Any other business

42. Amatey Doku explained this was his last time attending the UKSCQA and that his successor would be taking on the role of representing the NUS for the next meeting. The Chair led the committee in thanking him for his contributions during his tenure.

Item 10: Next meeting of the UKSCQA

43. The next meeting of the UKSCQA will be held in September 2019. A poll of committee members was in progress to determine the most suitable date. Following a suggestion by the SFC, it was hoped to hold this meeting in Edinburgh.

The meeting then concluded.
