

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Friday 6th September 2019 at 10.00am at the Scottish Funding Council, Edinburgh

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
Dr Dee Bird (SFC)
Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Dr Ben Calvert (University of South Wales) (**by phone**)
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (Lancaster) (**by phone**)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Nicholas Holland (OfS)
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE)
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (UUK)
Claire Sosienski Smith (NUS)
Jackie Yip (Cardiff Student's Union)

Apologies:

Eve Alcock (The Student's Union, Bath)
Gordon Ashworth (CMA)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
David S Jones (Queen's University, Belfast)
Susan Lapworth (OfS)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Arti Saraswat (AoC)

Secretariat:

Scott Court
Joseph Tennant
Gemma Tombs (**by phone**)

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 Claire Sosienski Smith (NUS) and Nicholas Holland (OfS), for whom this was their first UKSCQA meeting. He also thanked the Scottish Funding Council for hosting the meeting.

Item 2: Approval of the Minutes of previous meetings

2. The minutes of the preceding February, March and June 2019 meetings ([Min/10](#), [Min/11](#) and [Min/12](#) respectively) were approved by the committee.

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. SFC reported that its QASHE¹ group was now fully operational and was proving very helpful in supporting the SFC in its work.
5. DfE-NI reported that as the political situation in Northern Ireland was unchanged, with the Stormont Assembly still suspended, previous quality assurance arrangements for Northern Ireland remained in place and they will be undertaking the usual APR process again this winter.
6. HEFCW reported the updating of the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales* against the European Qualifications Framework was nearing completion. (*Update: Shortly after the meeting this work was completed, and the report has since been [published](#)*). HEFCW also confirmed that the Chief Executives of the four UK funders/regulators will meet again in November 2019. It is expected this meeting will now regularly recur.
7. OfS reported that they were continuing to make registration decisions on providers. From 1 August 2019, the OfS had assumed its full regulatory powers. OfS was also planning to organise several roadshows in Autumn to engage with and educate providers regarding its ongoing monitoring and intervention activities.
8. The Chair concluded this agenda item with some context-setting remarks about the issues today's meeting would be addressing. He felt it was likely that government pressure on the English sector to combat perceived grade inflation would continue, given the increased interest in this topic from various MPs and despite the recent resignation of the Minister of State for Universities who had challenged the sector on this matter originally. The Chair also drew the committee's attention to several recent articles in the UK press that criticised the sector for what the articles asserted were declining quality standards, which highlighted that this topic was now a recurring area of interest for the national media. Turning to trans-national education (TNE), the Chair had been impressed by the high level of interest shown in UK higher education during his recent trip to a HE conference in India, and noted the importance this international interest lent to the committee's own deliberations on TNE.

¹ Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education group

Item 4: Update on *transparent, consistent and fair academic standards* programme

9. Universities UK presented paper **UKSC 19/11**, setting out their proposals for how to progress the committee's work on degree algorithms². It was proposed that UUK and GuildHE undertake new research over the course of the next 9-10 months to:
- provide an update on progress across the sector since the original degree algorithms report was published in 2017³ (and the publication of the statement of intent⁴ earlier this year), reviewing actions taken and changes made;
 - to reach a shared understanding of common and good practice for degree algorithms.

This project would culminate in mid-2020 with the publication of:

- a) a research report that would explore common parameters and principles for algorithm design, review & presentation, and
- b) a high-level guidance paper setting out the issues and questions institutions may want to consider when designing, reviewing and presenting their degree algorithms.

UUK stressed they were not looking to establish a single algorithm for all purposes, but rather looking for a sector-agreed position. GuildHE added that whilst in 2016 there had been some hesitancy in the sector regarding this work, there was a sense that attitudes had shifted, changes had been made and this was a good point to see if greater agreement and greater transparency had emerged as to what algorithms are in use.

10. A general discussion of the proposal then followed, covering:
- the extent to which a diversity of algorithms was felt necessary to suit different types of degree and learners;
 - how could one define, and thus identify, good practice in way that was truly objective?;
 - questions of institutional autonomy;
 - did algorithm design affect the quality of marking? On the one hand, algorithms were only applied once the assessment of students' work had taken place, but might foreknowledge of how an algorithm will subsequently be applied influence marking behaviour?
11. After some discussions specifically revolving around the term "good practice", it was suggested the project could seek to identify "effective" practice. The corollary being that a "bad" algorithm would be one that was *ineffective* at producing equitable and fair outcomes for all students.
12. There was strong support for action on algorithms from student members. It was felt that there was likely a current lack of awareness among students of degree algorithm practice and diversity, (and it was noted that the term "degree algorithms" itself might be unfamiliar⁵ – possibly leading to a lower incidence of complaints to the OIA about them than might otherwise be the case). Students were increasingly concerned by the articles

² "Degree algorithms" being the formulae, or set of rules, applied by an institution to the final marks obtained by a student in order to determine both the threshold for passing/failing a degree and to award any different classes of degree.

³ [Understanding degree algorithms](#), October 2017

⁴ [Degree classification: transparency, reliability and fairness – a statement of intent](#), May 2019

⁵ Though there was some discussion in the meeting of maybe using alternative terminology, there was no agreement on a substitute for "degree algorithms".

in the press questioning the fairness and quality of standards in HE. It was therefore proposed that useful information be disseminated to students from the proposed project, to help inform those looking to choose where to study and to empower students with knowledge of how they were assessed. NUS made the further suggestion of research into how the increasing perception of a degree as a product that one purchases, and thus that one expects to derive maximum value from (i.e. get a first-class degree), may be influencing algorithm behaviour.

13. The Chair concluded the item by summing up some key points made in the discussion:
- at this stage the proposal was for the project to produce a high-level guidance document, setting out principles and approaches, with useful questions for institutions to reflect on;
 - it was very important to keep the students' interests central to the thinking;
 - it was requested that the research project engage with both employers and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies;
 - it would be best to try to keep the algorithm work and the degree inflation work distinct for the purposes of the committee's thinking;
 - the time period over which variations in degree outcomes performance are valid is something we need to know more about.

He also reiterated the concern expressed in previous meetings that if the sector was felt not to have taken adequate measures to rationalise the use of different degree algorithms, or to assure that suitable mechanisms were in place to verify their suitability and fairness, then – at least in England – there was a risk of governmental and/or regulatory intervention in future.

14. UUK thanked the committee for its input and noted in particular that it would seek to increase the degree of student input in the project. UUK also agreed to make some minor amendments to the budget breakdown in the paper in response to members suggestions.

Action: UUK will amend the proposal document and its attached budget breakdown in light of comments of the committee today, then circulate to members electronically for approval.

15. Working with colleagues from across the sector, QAA had developed guidance on how to prepare a Degree Outcomes Statement (DOS) and presented this to the committee ([UKSC 19/12](#)) alongside a complementary *Checklist for governing bodies* ([Annex A](#)).
16. The sector representative for Scotland welcomed the section in the guidance that explained the differing expectations in each nation with regards to DOSs, (with Scottish readers being referred to the Statement of Intent). He requested this nation-specific guidance be reiterated in any cover letter that was used when circulating these guidelines to the sector.
17. Several members expressed approval of the supplied checklist for governing bodies, though it was suggested by HEFCW that in practice this checklist was likely to be more of use to the mid-level staff at institutions who would likely actually prepare the statements and then assure their governing bodies that it was adequate. In correspondence prior to the meeting, the representative from CUC had made a similar point and had suggested some further changes to the text of the checklist. The Chair concurred that it was likely governing bodies would delegate the composition of the statement to other staff and so it was agreed the checklist would be re-titled to reflect this expected application.

18. The Universities Wales representative asked whether it would be useful for the guidance statements to encourage institutions to comment on their relative position in the sector. Other members felt this did not need to be included explicitly in the guidance, preferring to let institutions choose whether to frame their response in that context. QAA also made the point that, given concerns that institutions were feeling pressured to climb university league tables, explicitly asking for commentary on an institution's position within them could inadvertently reinforce such pressure.
19. The Chair reiterated that the intention was that in mid-2020 the committee would review the initial set of degree outcomes statements submitted during the coming academic year 2019-20. It could then assess if this exercise had been effective and was worth repeating, or if a different course of action was indicated.

Action: The main DOS guidance document is approved for use in current form. Its accompanying *checklist for governing bodies* is to be re-titled and the minor changes proposed to it by the CUC representative will be considered prior to a final version being approved.

Item 5: *Degree standards project: External examiners*

20. The Chair introduced this item, reminding the committee that the strategic report from Advance HE on the *Degree standards* project (**UKSC 19/8**) had been originally circulated for the June 2019 meeting but due to lack of time had been moved to today for discussion. The project, which operates within England, Wales & Northern Ireland, was now commencing the fourth year of its five-year funding. The committee was asked to provide some further strategic direction to help prioritisations and objectives for both years 4 and 5, and to consider what work it might wish to facilitate or organise for beyond the end of the project in mid-2021.
21. QAA commented it was clear this course had added value but queried what the plan was for scaling up the subject calibration work, as take-up of this element so far had not been high enough to demonstrate the full value that could come from this kind of activity. A sector rep for England added his praise for the value of the subject calibration workshop he had attended, though noted many subject areas were not yet minded to fully engage with such calibration work.
22. It was agreed that finding a long-term, sustainable way to perpetuate the training of external examiners was necessary. The costs would likely need to be covered by the sector paying somehow, as the funders/regulators could not financially support the initiative indefinitely. The specific option (suggested by Advance HE) of the UKSCQA officially designating & funding a body to provide the course in future was rejected as not being within the committee's gift. The general view was also that it was not for the UKSCQA to mandate institutions to undertake the training.
23. Some members expressed disappointment that the promotion of the course by Advance HE had not been as wide-reaching as they would have liked. NUS offered to help publicise the course via its officers raising it with relevant Pro-VCs at their institutions.

It was agreed that:

- the strategic priority for Advance HE was to try to maximise the number of institutions within the participating nations that were reached by the course in the last two years of the project. This was deemed to be of higher priority than revisiting institutions who'd been involved in years 1 and 2 and had requested return visits to train more staff. However, it was felt the subject calibration work that was already planned for year 4 should definitely proceed.
- The programme should continue to be promoted as widely as possible across the participating nations, and cross-institutional cooperation (such as institutions collaborating to host courses open to attendees from across a particular region) should continue to be encouraged.
- Embedding the training into normal practise was the priority and it remained the expectation that this becomes a self-sustaining feature of the external examining system in the UK.
- It was for Advance HE to consider the most viable way to take the programme forward beyond year 5 and suggesting solutions that would be financially sustainable. The committee did not expect it could provide any specific endorsement of a given option.

Action: The secretariat will convey to Advance HE the committee's feedback.

Item 6: Student's perspectives

24. The NUS presented a paper summarising the perspectives of all the students' representatives to the committee over recent meetings. The paper outlined that their experience had overall been very positive, and that the reflections expressed therein were intended to further strengthen the voice of students in the room and highlight good practice.
25. The NUS requested that when preparing papers for the committee, members should bear in mind the student perspective and invite input from the committee's student members during drafting. Also, though the induction provided by the secretariat had been helpful to student members in this regard, members were asked to try to minimise the use of industry jargon and acronyms in discussions, papers and associated correspondence. The use of accessible language should also extend to the concepts being discussed within papers, as students' representatives may have less familiarity with these than has been assumed. Another suggestion was for the committee to hold a dedicated day, separate from the regular meetings, at which members could present their organisational priorities and describe how these relate to the work of the committee.
26. The Chair welcomed this paper, emphasised that all the student members were valued, full members of the committee and that they should feel free to query anything that has not been made sufficiently clear.
27. HEFCW suggested that the NUS and student reps be given a regular slot in the agenda of each meeting to present an update and/or a paper, with which the committee agreed.

Action: Future UKSCQA meetings will include a standing agenda item for an update from the NUS, with the option to submit a paper.

Item 7: Revised terms of reference for the UKSCQA

28. The Secretariat introduced a working draft of a revised Terms of Reference for the committee. New terms were required as both the role of the committee, and the higher education landscape in the UK, had evolved considerably since the UKSCQA was first constituted. The Terms were designed to be modular, to facilitate editing and revision as the Committee desired.
29. The committee approved the overall structure of the document and in discussions requested some revisions to specific sections, including:
- Specifying that, where possible and in order to broaden representation, the two student sector representatives should come from providers in different nations of the UK;
 - The circumstances in which the committee's documents and discussions can be shared with member's colleagues and/or other bodies such as QASHE needed clarified, as the currently proposed wording was felt by several members to be too restrictive;
 - Some clarification around the representation of Universities Wales (UW) & Universities Scotland (US) on the committee, (though it was noted UW and US were happy with current arrangement where rather than having a separate seat on the committee, they were represented through a designated sector member from their nation and via UUK itself);
 - Consideration of whether, given the changes to the committee, it was still necessary to have the CMA represented on the committee
 - Some more detail regarding under what circumstances discussions should be deferred if a key stakeholder is absent, to mitigate against undue delay in making progress with the committee's work;

Action: The Secretariat will compile feedback from members given both today, and via future correspondence, to assemble a final version of the Terms that can be presented to the next UKSCQA meeting for approval.

Item 8: Brief updates on ongoing projects and action points from previous meetings

30. The Secretary introduced a new standing agenda item, to present to the committee a paper (**UKSC 19/15**) compiling brief updates on current projects the committee is working on, where neither a detailed discussion nor any new decisions were expected to be necessary on this occasion.
31. The funders/regulators mentioned their intention to undertake a mapping of the "baseline requirements" from the Revised Operating Model against the current quality arrangements in the nations. HEFCW & DFENI welcomed this.
32. An action point from the June 2019 meeting had been for the creation of a new annex to the *Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-awarding Bodies* document that would contain the newly-approved Degree classification descriptions and explain how their use would differ between the different nations of the UK. This annex had been prepared by the QAA and was presented today (**UKSC 19/15 - Annex A**). During the course of this work, the QAA had identified that the parent *Frameworks*

document was now out of date due to the adoption of the new quality code last year. QAA submitted to the secretariat their proposed revisions to update this document, but since these changes were fairly numerous it had been agreed that the funders/regulators would prefer to take some more time over the next month or so to properly consider these changes before settling on an agreed version of the document. The sector representative for Scotland asked to be involved in the discussions regarding the *Frameworks* document revision, which was agreed to.

33. It was agreed the Degree classification descriptions annex could nevertheless proceed to publication once the OfS confirmed they were happy with the paragraph describing the use in the different nations; (the other funders/regulators had already confirmed it correctly described the situation in their nations).

Action: OfS to confirm in the next few weeks if they are happy with the nation-specific introduction in the Degree Classifications Descriptions annex. Following this approval, the annex can be published.

Action: QAA and the funders/regulators will continue to correspond on the revision of the full Frameworks document and arrive at an agreed new version for publication later this year.

34. A UUKi consultation document on Transnational Education was presented to the committee (**UKSC 19/15- Annex B**) for their information. This consultation's purpose is to hear the sector's views of the two possible options for future work on TNE proposed therein.

35. The Chair advised that it would be helpful in maintaining a UK-wide unity of approach to TNE if this consultation were to progress in parallel to any other work being done on TNE at the moment. OfS confirmed they expected to be publishing something on TNE this Autumn, though this would not be a consultation but rather new guidance on how the OfS intended to regulate TNE. Timescales for this were due to be finalised in the next few weeks, though OfS did not wish to cause a delay the UUKi consultation. It was agreed that since it was likely both these pieces of work could be published within the next month, which would provide the desired unity of effort across the UK and still meet the urgency of the issue, there would be an attempt to coordinate their announcement.

36. HEFCW expressed the view that within the UUKi document there was too much focus on enhancement and that there also needed to be a focus on the assurance side. Visits to the institutions in question were indispensable, in their view. The OIA and the Welsh sector representative concurred that assurance was indeed crucial.

Action: UUKi consultation shall proceed later in September, as will the OfS publication of guidance on the regulation of TNE.

37. QAA highlighted the work that had been undertaken recently to affirm academic integrity, as described in the updates paper **UKSC 19/15**. The challenge of tackling essay mills remained a major focus of their work in this area. The QAA update also sought the committee's advice on several key questions, which led to the following action point. The Chair also confirmed this topic would be revisited at the next committee meeting.

Action: Members to reflect on if they can offer any further advice on the specific challenges posed by QAA in the paper, namely:

- **Identifying which individuals in HE organisations might have responsibility for taking steps to address issues around contract cheating⁶**
- **Identifying whether further action should be taken to provide guidance to students in particular.**

38. It was briefly noted that the Memorandum of Understanding discussed at the UKSCQA's previous meeting in June 2019 had now been circulated to the committee's core members for signature, with some signed copies already having been returned. The process of collecting these will continue in the weeks to come.

Item 9: Any Other Business

39. No other items of business were presented.

Item 10: Next meeting of the UKSCQA

40. The next meeting of the UKSCQA will be held in January or February 2020. A poll of committee members would be taken shortly to determine the most suitable date. The location is expected to be London.

The meeting then concluded.

⁶ "Contract cheating" is a practice in which a student pays a company (sometimes known as an "essay mill") to produce, on demand, an original essay or other piece of coursework that the student then fraudulently submits to their institution as their own work.