

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 25th February 2020 at 10.00am
at the Office for Students, Finlaison House, London

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
Eve Alcock (The Student's Union, Bath)
Dr Dee Bird (SFC)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Professor Ben Calvert (University of South Wales) (**by phone**)
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (Lancaster University)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Joy Elliott-Bowman (Independent HE)
Nicholas Holland (OfS)
David S Jones (Queen's University, Belfast) (**by phone**)
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
John Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)
Arti Saraswat (AoC) (**by phone**)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (UUK)
Vicki Stott (QAA)
Jackie Yip (Cardiff Student's Union)

Apologies:

Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Scott Court (Secretariat)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE)
Susan Lapworth (OfS)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Arti Saraswat (AoC)
Claire Sosienski Smith (NUS)

Secretariat:

Joseph Tennant
Gemma Tombs

Item 1: Welcome from the Chair and apologies received

1. In the Chair, Andrew Wathey opened the meeting by welcoming members and extended a particular welcome to those who were stepping in for members unable to attend; namely

Vicki Stott (QAA, deputising for Douglas Blackstock) and Joy Elliott-Bowman (Independent HE, deputising for Alex Proudfoot).

Item 2: Academic integrity and essay mills

2. The Chair introduced the two guest speakers who were joining the meeting for this agenda item. These were:
 - Associate Professor Cath Ellis (University of New South Wales, Sydney), who joined via videolink. Prof Ellis's research focus is academic integrity, with a particular interest in contract cheating.
 - Gareth Crossman (QAA), the Head of Policy & Communications at QAA and convener of the QAA's Academic Integrity Advisory Group.
3. The committee watched a short presentation from Prof Ellis, which provided some background to the issue of essay mills and discussed the problem of contract cheating. Gareth Crossman then presented the paper from the QAA, **UKSC 20/1**, updating the UKSCQA on their recent activities on academic integrity. He confirmed that QAA is in the process of revising its guidance for providers on contract cheating. *(Following the meeting it was confirmed by the NUS representative that they did not have any current plans to revisit their own advice on this subject).*
4. There followed a general discussion of the issues raised by the guest speakers, and on what the potential role of the UKSCQA might be in addressing the problem of contract cheating in the UK.
5. Following this discussion, the Chair thanked the guest speakers for their contributions and the following actions were agreed:

Action: A meeting is to be arranged of a working group of members to discuss how to take this topic forward.

Item 3: Approval of the Minutes of previous meetings

6. The minutes of the September 2019 meeting (**Min/13**) were approved by the committee.

Item 4: Update from funders/regulators & cross-nation matters

7. HEFCW updated the committee that it was awaiting the legislation regarding the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, which was due in April or so. HEFCW's Quality Assessment Committee had recently expressed its support for HEFCW to seek joint approaches to quality issues across all nations of the UK, but where alignment with England was not possible a joint approach across the other three nations was still desirable.
8. SFC reported that they were nearing the end of their current 3-year enhancement theme of "evidence for enhancement", and that some of the outputs from this work are available online on the SFC website. The choice of the next enhancement theme is currently under discussion. A conference entitled "*Beyond measure?*" is being held in Glasgow in June, at

which international delegates will gather to share best practice in using evidence to enhance the student experience.

9. DfENI updated the committee that since the last UKSCQA a new Northern Ireland government had now been established and ministers appointed. There had been a lot of engagement between the new NI government and DfENI since then, and the next likely step will be for a soft consultation, to take place in the near future, to engage with stakeholders on potential changes to the quality assurance arrangements in Northern Ireland.
10. OfS reported how it was still within its first full year of ongoing regulation activity, and so a lot of implementation work was still in progress. A business plan for 2020-21 is being worked on at the moment and will be published in due course. Several consultations are also likely to take place in the coming months, including on how best to incorporate the new degree classifications descriptions and also new guidance on student protection plans.
11. In response to a query from GuildHE about the OfS' plans regarding random sampling, the OfS indicated that the upcoming publication of the aforementioned 2020-21 business plan would provide some further information on that.

Item 5: Update from student members

12. Eve Alcock updated the committee on behalf of all three student members. An area of significant current concern to students was the impact upon them of the industrial action being undertaken by the UCU. Responses of universities and of student unions to the strikes had varied across the country, and discussions were in many cases still ongoing about mitigating the effect on student's studies and their accumulation of credits. There remained a lot of concern about the effect on students' learning outcomes, graduations and on how many credits can be discounted during the strike periods.
13. It was also reported that a recurring theme in the current student elections season was that more recent student intakes value acquiring skills and enhancing employability as priorities. There was also concern expressed that efforts by the UKSCQA to address perceived grade inflation were in tension with efforts to expand access to higher education and the goals of institutions' access and participation plans.
14. The Chair also noted that a major issue affecting higher education at the moment was the coronavirus epidemic. Some countries were reported to be closing, or considering closing universities as a precaution, and there were clear implications for international travel on students hoping to come to the UK for study later this year. With many universities expected to start receiving large numbers of new students from Asia in the coming months, the outbreak was raising doubts as how many will actually be able to start their studies on schedule. This was a rapidly developing situation and it was noted by members that contingency plans, and possible offering of assistance or a pooling of resources between UK institutions, could well be needed.

Action: Links to the available advice on coronavirus mitigation planning are to be circulated by the relevant members.

Item 6: Brief updates on ongoing projects and action points from previous meetings

15. The Secretary presented a paper **UKSC 20/2**, with updates on the committee's current projects, which the committee noted.

Item 7: Approach to reviewing the Statement of Intent one year on

16. The Chair invited UUK and GuildHE to present their paper, **UKSC 20/3**, which provided updates on the work done so far on the degree algorithm project that was proposed at September 2019's meeting (see **UKSC 19/11**), subsequently approved by the funders/regulators and by the Chair, and now underway. The paper also set out UUK/GuildHE's thoughts on how the committee could approach the one-year-on review of the impact and effectiveness of the statement of intent (SOI). (This review is due to take place around the time of the next UKSCQA meeting in June 2020).
17. UUK explained that the survey element of the project had now closed, with 68 responses received and now being analysed. Four workshops discussing algorithms were going to be held around the UK in the next month to provide further sector input for the project. Some initial highlights from the survey were presented by UUK, and a more complete digest of the responses will follow in the months to come and be available for the aforementioned summer review.
18. GuildHE reiterated the point made in previous meetings that it was important the sector be seen to be fully engaging on algorithms and the wider goals of the statement of intent, lest the government in England feel it needed to intervene itself. The chair agreed, and felt that the sector has shown that movement is indeed taking place. This needed to continue, with clear outcomes identified and highlighted.
19. There was a brief discussion of how the UKSCQA could try to resolve the differing political pressures the UK's nations were experiencing on the issues covered by the SOI; with the English government in particular very interested in seeing change and considering taking action to drive it, but with the devolved administrations taking a different stance.
20. There was next a discussion around how the review of the SOI could be approached, the paper having proposed it revolve around the four central commitments of the SOI that had UK-wide relevance. It was also noted that the review should look at the degree outcomes statements that are being published by providers in England and Wales, as well as the insights into changes in algorithm practice from the ongoing project.

Actions: Members are asked to:

- **help promote the upcoming algorithm workshops to colleagues to help ensure the widest possible representation at these events.**
- **send any feedback they have on the paper or those project outputs presented thus far to UUK / GuildHE.**

Item 8: Revised terms of reference for the UKSCQA

21. The Secretariat presented an updated draft of a new Terms of Reference for the committee, which incorporated minor changes requested both at the last full UKSCQA meeting in September, and in subsequent correspondence with members.

22. A notable addition arising from those discussions was the proposal of a new role of Deputy Chair, to be filled by someone at a Vice-Chancellor or Principal level, and to be affiliated to an institution in a different nation of the UK to that of the Chair. It was decided that having someone at that level of seniority – the same as the Chair – was important for this new position, even though this meant somewhat restricting the available pool of candidates. This was because the Deputy could need to act as, and with the authority of, the Chair in certain circumstances.

Action: Final version of the Terms of Reference to be written, incorporating the last few minor changes.

Item 9: Any Other Business

23. Independent HE wished to highlight two issues of concern to their members regarding:
- a) The different quality assurance arrangements that apply for independent HE providers without access to public funding across the devolved administrations. The arrangements differed from nation to nation and some institutions were finding it challenging to satisfy the various requirements for operating across the different nations of the UK.
 - b) The future of the current system of validation by which new entrants and non-degree-awarding institutions are able to gain access to the HE market in England. It was noted that this was a system that OfS intended to review later in 2020, and Independent HE had preferences for how this might be approached.
24. It was pointed out by the Chair and the funders/regulators that the committee's remit did not enable it to set policy in this area, nor to require the nations to align in their quality assessment procedures. Similarly, deciding validation arrangements in England was not within the committee's scope of action.
25. The Chair noted, however, that it might be useful for the committee to discuss these topics once there had been some further engagement between Independent HE and the national funders/regulators to ensure a common understanding of the current arrangements, to help clarify spheres of responsibility and to set out what areas the UKSCQA might usefully contribute on.
26. It was also suggested that the experience of the Open University could prove useful to Independent HE's members in illustrating how an institution operating across the whole UK could navigate the differing national requirements.

Action: Independent HE to engage with the funders/regulators on a future paper to potentially bring the topic before the committee at the June 2020 meeting.

27. There were no other items of AOB.

Item 10: Next meeting of the UKSCQA

28. The next meeting of the UKSCQA is planned for 5 June 2020, at the offices of the OfS in London. A poll of committee members would be taken shortly to determine the most suitable date for the following, October 2020 meeting. Reflecting the desire of the committee to have at least one meeting a year in a different nation of the UK, options for possible venues for the October meeting are being explored.

The meeting then concluded.
