

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Friday 9th October 2020 at 10.00am via videoconference

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (University of Lancaster)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Hillary Gyebi-Ababio (NUS)
Nicholas Holland (Office for Students)
Derek Horsburgh (Scottish Funding Council)
David S Jones (Queen's University, Belfast)
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE)
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (Universities UK)
Vicki Stott (QAA)
Professor Alyson Tobin (Edinburgh Napier University)

Apologies:

Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Dr Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Arti Saraswat (AoC)

Secretariat:

Joseph Tennant

Item 1: Welcome from the Chair and apologies received

1. In the Chair, Andrew Wathey opened the meeting by extending a welcome to new members and to those deputising for members unable to make this meeting. These were: Hillary Gyebi-Ababio (new NUS representative), Derek Horsburgh (temporary SFC representative), Vicki Stott (deputising for Douglas Blackstock, QAA) and Professor Alyson Tobin (deputising for Prof John Sawkins). Apologies received were also noted.

Item 2: Update from funders/regulators and cross-nation matters

2. The Chair invited the funders/regulators to update the committee on any relevant recent developments.
3. HEFCW was liaising with Welsh Government regarding additional funding to support the sector during the pandemic and had confirmed that it would minimise the numbers of consultations carried out. HEFCW had also been publishing further guidance for institutions, as well as undertaking other work on the maintenance of the quality of HE provision in Wales.
4. SFC was focusing on supporting the sector at this difficult time. As mentioned at the previous meeting, the Scottish Government had asked for a review of the sustainability of HE be undertaken. The interim report of this project is due in the next few weeks and a consultation will follow, to which the UKSCQA may wish to make a submission. The final report is then due in Spring 2021.
5. DfE-NI was engaging with the sector in Northern Ireland to assist it through the pandemic. However, some regular planned activity had had to be paused and the usual Annual Provider Review process had been cancelled for 2020. It was hoped more regular activities could resume in the coming months.
6. OfS reported that it too had been engaging frequently with many providers and publishing guidance on its regulatory expectations. OfS's chief executive had issued a press release on 28th September about the return to campus and maintenance of the quality of provision. In the next few weeks, the OfS would be receiving institutions' interim financial returns. Also, OfS had just published an insight note on principles-based regulation, which will tie into the upcoming consultation OfS intends to run on its registration conditions pertaining to quality and standards.

Item 3: Update from student members

7. NUS had been seeking nominees from different nations of the UK to fill the two vacant student members seats on the UKSCQA. It was anticipated that these seats would be able to be filled shortly.
8. NUS discussed the current situation with coronavirus in the sector, with multiple outbreaks having occurred at different universities. Large groups of students in halls of residence were being required to self-isolate at affected institutions and have their previously-blended provision move fully online. NUS reported that:
 - many students were concerned about the quality of the provision they would receive under a purely online model, and questioned if this would still be comparable to the standard of tuition in normal times, or to what was expected via the blended delivery model they had been promised;
 - digital poverty among students was a serious concern and NUS had received reports of some students facing serious difficulties accessing learning due to IT issues (such as university software not being compatible with their own devices, or problems with internet connectivity, etc.). NUS was pushing for more financial investment by the HE sector into supporting the IT needs of all students;
 - at an all-party parliamentary group held earlier in the week, students reported accommodation problems and consequent mental health issues arising from being

placed into isolation. NUS felt this raised questions of whether affected students were receiving value-for-money;

- there was also concern for the welfare of post-graduate students now facing hardship, especially those not covered by UKRI funding arrangements.

The Chair thanked the NUS for summarising the current issues, which would inform discussions going forward.

Item 4: Brief updates on ongoing UKSCQA work

9. The **minutes** of the preceding February and June 2020 meetings (**Min/14** and **Min/15** respectively) were approved by the committee.
10. The Secretary noted that work to agree new **Terms of Reference** for the UKSCQA would resume in the next few months and, by resolving remaining questions via correspondence, it was hoped to be able to formally adopt them in the near future.
11. **No detriment.** Following up on an action point from the last meeting about establishing a working group to look at “no detriment” issues, UUK confirmed it was now having regular weekly discussions with GuildHE and QAA that included this topic. Both UUK and GuildHE had reached out to their members to learn more about how “no detriment” policies had been affecting them.
12. The committee characterised this as a developing situation with some impacts only now coming to light. In particular, the following aspects were stressed in discussions:
 - There was no single “no detriment” policy emerging, but rather a variety of “safety net” and “emergency / supplementary regulations” in play across different providers. There were differing views on how long such regulations would remain in place. GuildHE felt that in future there might be a shift from “no detriment” policies to more general emergency regulations that could remain in place for some time – not least to recognise the impact on outcomes for those mid-way through their degree;
 - There was concern expressed that no detriment policies could push up results to some extent, though one member did report that at their own institution it had seemed make only a marginal difference to results;
 - It was noted that, in many cases, boards of examiners were still to meet to consider their options.
13. The Chair observed that many data metrics for this year would likely diverge from any underlying trends as a result of the pandemic’s effects, and it was agreed the committee would need to keep this area under review throughout the upcoming term.
14. QAA provided a brief update on developments in **transnational education** (TNE). QAA had been pleased to receive the commission from UUK/GuildHE to design and deliver the new model for UK TNE review and had been working on this since July 2020. A broader model of delivery, the new approach was based around the 11 principles endorsed by UUK, GuildHE and the wider sector. A group of sector experts is supporting this work and it is overseen by a steering group from the commissioning bodies. At this stage, the QAA was just finishing the proposed evaluation method and model. The consultation on this would be launching in the next week, with events for both QAA members and the wider sector to engage with, and comment on, the proposals. Following analysis of the responses, the finalised method will be published in January 2021. Then, working with

UUKi and GuildHE, QAA will draw on various data sources to identify proposed countries that best meet the UK's needs and selection criteria. QAA's intention is to bring all of these proposals back to the UKSCQA to ratify the final selection of countries. The initial schedule will cover AYs 2021/22 & 22/23, with the UKSCQA ideally ratifying these in Spring 2021.

Item 5: Academic integrity and essay mills

15. The committee discussed essay mills earlier in the year, but the Chair noted that the pandemic was potentially exacerbating the problem of contract cheating. In the interests of student protection, it was felt important for the UKSCQA again to discuss this issue.
16. NUS confirmed that it had received many comments from students about essay mills in recent months. With students under extraordinary levels of stress and pressure this year, in some cases this was driving them towards use of essay mills. NUS student officers were seeking greater support from universities for struggling students and had also been calling for a campaign to end essay mills' aggressively-targeted advertising to students via conduits like Google Ads.
17. QAA agreed that essay mills appeared to have proliferated during the pandemic and reported that a league table of more than 800 mills, and even several price-comparison websites for them, had been found online. The possibility of new legislation to criminalise essay mills with the UK was an approach favoured by the QAA's Academic Integrity Advisory Group (AIAG), and appeared to be now gaining traction with the UK Government. QAA was therefore working with members of the AIAG to explore the legislative approaches taken in different countries and to formulate workable proposals for this option. 21st October had been also designated as "international day of action on contract cheating", on which QAA will launch a new academic integrity charter. This will be offered for QAA members initially, and then to other institutions across the sector to sign up to as a demonstration of their commitment to tackling the problem. Further QAA webinars will also be held around the new guidance on academic integrity that it published in June. GuildHE added that work was also taking place on digital proctoring.
18. The Chair thanked members for their contributions to the discussion and proposed that this item return to the agenda, accompanied by an update paper, at the first UKSCQA meeting of 2021.

Action: QAA and other members working on this topic will further update the committee on this issue at the first UKSCQA meeting of 2021.

Item 6: National Student Survey review

19. HEFCW raised the issue of the review of the National Student Survey (NSS) that the Department for Education (England) had instructed the OfS to undertake. This originated in the recent UK Government statement on reducing regulatory burden on universities and OfS planned to gather information from various stakeholders during the course of its review. The format for the first phase of the review, looking specifically at the English sector and taking place during the remainder of 2020, was outlined on the OfS website. A second phase, looking UK-wide and bringing in representatives of other nations of the UK as full participants, would follow in the new year.

20. It was noted that the NSS was a UK-wide instrument underpinned by a shared memorandum of understanding between the four nations' funders and regulators, and was a key element of quality assurance in the devolved administrations. HEFCW, SFC and DfENI all strongly felt retaining a UK-wide approach to the NSS in the future was very important and expressed concerns at having only observer status for the first phase of the OfS's review. In their view, having an England-only panel for phase 1 – which would report to the UK Government at the end of 2020 – could unhelpfully restrict the scope of subsequent discussions in the second, UK-wide phase.
21. In response to a question, it was clarified that the UKSCQA had not been specifically asked to contribute as a body, nor was it expected to consider or approve the eventual outcomes of, OfS's review of the NSS. OfS confirmed that the second phase of the review in the new year was explicitly designed to include representation from other nations of the UK and that it would also welcome input from UKSCQA members about the current NSS.
22. In discussions, several members shared their experiences and perceptions of the current NSS. The NUS indicated it favoured an ongoing UK-wide approach. Other points noted included:
- that considerable amounts of resource and effort had been invested by the whole UK sector in driving engagement with the survey each year and on creating the brand of the NSS;
 - that it would be useful to re-articulate the specific goals of the NSS and clarify the purposes for which it would be used in future;
 - that the conclusions of the as-yet unpublished Pearce review into the TEF would have relevance for the NSS review;
 - that SFC's recent work on the enhancement theme of "evidence-led enhancement" had specifically included a lot of analysis of NSS data, and so could be useful to the OfS's review.
23. The Chair noted there may be scope for the UKSCQA to supply some contribution to the NSS review, timescales permitting, regarding the committee's view of the value of the NSS. This would be taken up in a separate meeting with the funders/regulators and/or the UKSCQA's core members.

Action: The next regular meeting between the funders/regulators and the Chair will consider the matter of the NSS review.

Item 7: Review of the Statement of Intent one year on

24. UUK & GuildHE introduced their paper describing recent work on the review of progress with the statement of intent (SOI) ([UKSC 20/6](#)). Points that were highlighted included:
- that positive feedback had been received from both the sector and the DfE to the UKSCQA's recent publication of the *Principles for algorithm design* (and that, in association with the QAA, a number of workshops are planned for the new year about the implementation of the principles);
 - additional universities in England and Wales had now published degree outcomes statements;
 - a sector survey on this topic (as well as some other sector engagement) was still ongoing, and its results would feed into the upcoming formal report from UUK/GuildHE on SOI progress due later this year. This report will illustrate all the

activities that had been undertaken across all nations of the UK and at both sector and provider level to implement the SOI, as well as pointing the way forward where further work or discussions were needed.

25. The Chair felt the review demonstrated that the sector had moved decisively to address the challenges in the SOI. The committee also considered that in moving forward it must continue to follow a path reflecting the differing perspectives and needs of the four nations of the UK.
26. Considering next steps, the idea of a reasserting “covenant”, to be appended to the SOI, had been suggested. Another proposal was whether agreeing optimal ranges for degree outcomes (i.e. tolerance bands for the numbers of firsts and upper-second class degrees awarded, etc.), that retained some provider flexibility, could be a useful approach. Members felt any such ranges could not be one-size-fits-all and would need the detail carefully developed in close consultation with the sector. OfS stressed that whatever proposals the sector developed must not lose sight of English providers’ individual responsibility to satisfy their ongoing conditions of registration and encouraged providers to take a holistic approach to the areas of action described in the SOI rather than looking only at sector-wide initiatives.
27. Independent HE urged universities to consider the implications for their teaching partners of making changes to their grading and moderation practices. In particular, the risks of increasing administrative burden or of students having to have their work graded first at their teaching partner and then again at the sponsoring university. Institutions engaging more with their partners when considering these issues was recommended.
28. The committee concluded it was generally happy with the direction of travel of this body of work and looked forward to UUK/GuildHE’s report being published this winter.

Action: When ready, UUK/GuildHE to circulate draft report of their Review of the SOI to the committee for comment.

Item 8: External Examiners

29. The committee considered the strategic report provided by AdvanceHE on its progress with the Degree Standards project ([UKSC 20/7](#)) and the accompanying proposal ([UKSC 20/8](#)) for a new business model to allow the continuation of professional development training of external examiners beyond the end of the current funding in July 2021.
30. The committee welcomed the positive assessment of the project’s work given in the strategic report. Regarding the proposed business model for future provision of the training, it was noted that this was not entirely practical since the UKSCQA did not have the power to “designate” a delivery body for future training as the present proposal requested. However, the committee could express a preferred solution for how external examiners could receive professional development and calibration training in future.
31. The Chair urged the committee to consider what future options could help not just secure the legacy of the current project but also take the professional development of external examiners to the next level. As well as the training itself continuing, it was proposed:
 - there be some activity to improve the consistency across the sector of what an external examiner’s role involves;

- thought be given to ways of improving the advocacy and assurance of external examiners, leading to greater recognition for those who perform this useful function.
32. Some members expressed disappointment that the project had not made more progress with the calibration of examiners. There was also a call for future work to expand the pool of available examiners able to look at more vocational courses, with the suggestion that something that could help here was a national register of examiners that stated their areas of expertise. Such a register could take the form of a “college of examiners”, though this would require some administrative support to maintain.

Action: Discussions on this topic to continue between the funders/regulators and the Chair at their next regular meeting, and with AdvanceHE to explore the feasibility of the college model.

Item 9: Any Other Business

33. For the committee to have sufficient time to fully discuss emerging issues related to quality assurance as a result of the pandemic, it was decided that an additional meeting of the UKSCQA would take place before the end of the year.

Action: An additional UKSCQA meeting shall be organised for November/December 2020 to allow for further discussion.

Item 10: Next meeting of the UKSCQA

34. The above decision meant the next meeting would be arranged for either late November or early December 2020, with the one following due in February 2021.

The meeting then concluded.
