

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 2nd December 2020 at 9.00am via videoconference

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
Professor Mary Bishop
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Dr Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Hillary Gyebi-Ababio (NUS)
Nicholas Holland (Office for Students)
Susan Lapworth (Office for Students)
Kathryn O'Loan (Scottish Funding Council)
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE)
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Dr Arti Saraswat (AoC)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (Universities UK)
Vicki Stott (QAA)

Apologies:

Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
David S Jones (Queen's University, Belfast)

Secretariat:

Joseph Tennant

Item 1: Welcome from the Chair and apologies received

1. In the Chair, Andrew Wathey opened the meeting and extended a special welcome to Kathryn O'Loan, attending for the first time as the representative of the Scottish Funding Council. 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 reported it was continuing to work closely with institutions in Wales as part of its usual quality-related activities and pandemic response. It also had one item of other business to raise today, (see agenda item 6).
4. SFC was continuing its review of HE provision and sustainability. Its phase 1 report has now been produced, and phase 2 would now look at how to engage both across the HE sector and with employers and schools in creating the next outputs of the review. Phase 2 will also consider how SFC relates to other stakeholders around the UK and review its outcome agreement and impact framework. A particular focus will be the relationship between assurance, enhancement, the outcome agreement and impact process, and how to get them to work even more effectively.
5. DfE-NI was reviewing its quality model with some urgency as the model used last year could not be run again this year. Publishing pandemic-related guidance, such as on the upcoming student return home for Christmas, was also a top priority at the moment.
6. OfS had recently begun a consultation on regulating quality and standards of higher education in England, which runs until 12 January 2021. The consultation represented an early stage of policy development and, subject to its outcomes, there would be a further consultation on specific detail in early 2021; (see also agenda item 6). OfS had also been engaging with providers on how they delivered under coronavirus restrictions.

Item 3: Update from student members

7. The Chair invited the NUS to update the committee on any concerns or important developments from the student community.
8. NUS reported that:
 - It had been seeking nominees from different nations of the UK to fill the two vacant student members seats on the UKSCQA and it was anticipated that these seats would be filled in the new year.
 - Many students had recently been requesting a safety net equivalent to a “no detriment” policy as a result of how disrupted their year had been, and due to their concern at how prepared they were for the assessment period in January.
 - Students also sought a clearer definition of quality, particularly in relation to fees and value-for-money. They were also eager to understand more about what the rest of the 2020/21 academic year would look like.
9. Concerns were expressed about the impact the pandemic was having on learning. The committee agreed this was a difficult period and that when marks and other performance indicators (even provisional ones) came in they would need to be interpreted very carefully. It was highlighted that a large amount of useful guidance for the sector had been published by both the QAA and other sector bodies. The Chair felt that a clearer view of the next semester would become clearer in the next few weeks, as plans around Christmas crystallized and more information arrived regarding possible vaccine rollout in 2021.

Item 4: Review of progress with the Statement of Intent

10. The Chair invited UUK to update the committee on the review of the progress made in implementing the Statement of Intent¹. UUK presented a short update paper detailing the recent activities (see **UKSC 20/10**) and invited comment on the draft review document “*Protecting the value of UK degrees: Reviewing progress one-year-on from the statement of intent*” (**UKSC 20/10 Annex A**) that it was proposing to publish shortly to illustrate and reaffirm the sector’s commitment to the Statement of Intent.
11. The committee considered that:
- Overall, the draft review document was a very useful consolidation of what actions had been taken at both the sector and individual provider level.
 - Some revision of the text was necessary for the report to better reflect the full UK-wide picture of activities and to balance the differing approaches of the four nations of the UK around the Statement of Intent work. At present it was felt too much emphasis was on the English context and on responding to the concerns of the Department for Education (DfE) alone.
 - The report’s list of proposed future areas of work (paragraph 10 of **UKSC 20/10**) was a helpful summary of what further steps could be taken. This included addressing the issue of how degree outcomes were used by league tables, as well as the future of the external examiners’ training programme and a proposal that providers in England and Wales publish new degree outcomes statements for the 2020/21 academic year. It was noted that Welsh institutions had opted into the production of degree outcome statements, rather than this being a requirement, and therefore the production of new / updated statements would need to be agreed by Universities Wales.

Further points raised in discussion were:

- That, on balance, setting optimal ranges for degree outcomes as means of reducing “grade inflation” (as the DfE had previously proposed) would not be helpful. However, providers who were publishing degree outcomes statements should specifically reflect upon the possible causes of what the OfS’s analysis described as “unexplained grade inflation”.
 - It was important that since the report was coming out mid-pandemic, it be placed in that context. Innovations in assessment regimes developed by necessity during the current crisis might lead to some genuine improvements in student attainment as a result and, if so, this should not be confused with degree inflation.
 - OfS stressed that while sector-wide initiatives were welcome, providers in England should keep in mind their individual responsibilities for upholding standards in awards.
 - Independent HE was keen for universities and sector bodies to work even more closely with partnering institutions in this area, and suggested there be a short, shared statement regarding partnerships. (UUK felt there would likely not be enough time to organise such a statement before publication of this review in mid-December, but was happy to add further work on partnerships into their future plans).
12. UUK thanked the committee for its comments and undertook to incorporate this feedback in its revision of the document.

¹ *Degree classification transparency, reliability and fairness – a statement of intent*, UKSCQA, May 2019, <https://ukscqa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Statement-of-intent-FINAL.pdf>

Action: Committee members to send any further feedback on the draft review report to UUK/GuildHE as soon as possible. UUK will advise members of the deadline for such feedback and revise the draft review to reflect these points.

13. The committee next considered how best to secure the legacy of the soon-to-conclude Degree Standards project, which has been providing professional development training to External Examiners for the last few years but whose current funding ends mid-2021. The Chair felt this was an opportunity to achieve a step-change in take-up of the training and invited further comments from members on proposed models to allow the training to continue.
14. It had been agreed at the October 2020 UKSCQA meeting that while AdvanceHE continuing to deliver the training remained the committee's favoured outcome, further discussion was needed on what a feasible new business model for sustaining the work should look like. One further suggestion had been to create a new "College of Examiners" body with an accreditation role for examiners, which would help to give the external examiners' system more focus, higher profile and greater consistency as well as providing oversight of the training programme.
15. It was concluded that while useful progress had been made in the last few weeks, further consultation between stakeholders and AdvanceHE was needed to assemble a viable and detailed proposal. It was further suggested that a dedicated workshop of UKSCQA members might be a useful approach to finding a solution.
16. Regarding the current provision, there was a query about whether the course content needed some revision to more explicitly refer to national quality framework documents such as the UK Quality Code, and clearly connect the operational-level activities of examiners with the strategic-level structures underpinning the system.

Action: OfS agreed to discuss further with AdvanceHE and check when decisions needed to be made regarding their offer for next year.

Action: A further discussion between key stakeholder members to be held later this month to agree next steps.

Item 5: Quality assurance challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic

17. The Chair invited the committee to consider emerging quality assurance challenges as a consequence of the pandemic.
18. OfS recognised the huge challenges providers had faced this year, and efforts they had expended, but felt that the amount and quality of communication between providers and students about what was happening, and what was being planned for the near future, had been less than ideal in some cases. OfS also observed some divergence between the anecdotal reports it received from students about their experience, and the providers' own perceptions of how well provision had been delivered this year. OfS was currently considering how it might intervene more sharply on this issue in future, where such problems occurred. Separately, Sir Michael Barber was currently leading a review of lessons learned about digital teaching and learning in 2020, which was expected to

produce recommendations for post-pandemic provision. Members raised that there had also been a recent commission in Wales, working in collaboration with Jisc, that touched on this area and whose findings might be of interest for the above review.

19. HEFCW had been engaging with providers on issues such as financial sustainability and had been publishing its expectations on consumer protection, student experience, and quality. HEFCW's Quality Assessment Committee had considered the outcomes from this sector engagement work and had been happy with responses received to date. HEFCW had also secured additional funding from the Welsh government, (£27m for investment and recovery, £10m to support higher education students during the pandemic), which it was in the process of allocating.
20. OIA had received approximately 200 pandemic-related complaints so far but noted there is usually a time delay in when complaints are received as they go through the institution's own internal resolution process first. OIA felt the no-detriment policies will have helped a great deal but cautioned that students are given a time window of a year in which to submit complaints, so more complaints may yet be received about events in the latter half of 2020. In a few cases, it appeared to the OIA that providers had not engaged with complaints at all. OIA stressed that even amid the pandemic, institutions were still required to fully engage with complaints and progress them through the relevant procedures. A first set of case studies had recently been published by OIA, to illustrate emerging issues.
21. It was agreed this would be a useful topic to revisit at the next meeting.

Action: First UKSCQA meeting of 2021 to include further discussion of this topic.

Item 6: Any Other Business

22. HEFCW wished to discuss OfS's current consultation on its approach to regulating quality and standards in HE. HEFCW was concerned that this included a proposal to remove (for England) the current explicit link with the UK Quality Code's² expectations and core practices for providers. As a common baseline currently shared across all four nations of the UK, the UK Quality Code was a central element of UKSCQA's remit and HEFCW felt that England potentially moving to create its own unique criteria instead was both undesirable and important for the committee to discuss. HEFCW was also concerned that the proposal could possibly impact on UK PIs.
23. Several members, from both England and from the other nations, strongly agreed that it would not be desirable for England to stop using the UK Quality Code. It was also suggested that if England were to remove this link, it would be difficult to describe the four nations as still belonging to a common UK system. Independent HE added that after such a disrupted and difficult year in the sector, it felt this was not a good time to be proposing such a significant change to the sector.
24. OfS stressed its rationale for the proposals in the consultation was as outlined in the explanatory documents on the consultation's website³. As the consultation was currently

² UK Quality Code for Higher Education, published March 2018, available at <https://ukscqa.org.uk/what-we-do/uk-quality-code/>

³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-regulating-quality-and-standards-in-higher-education/>

still open, OfS was limited in what it could say about it at this particular time but it would read and consider all the opinions in the responses it received.

Action: It was agreed the funders/regulators would discuss this question further at their next regular call with the Chair.

Item 7: Next meeting of the UKSCQA

25. The next meeting will be arranged for February 2021.

The meeting then concluded.
