

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Monday 15th February 2021 at 10.00am via videoconference

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (University of Lancaster)
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Jason Bunting (Queens' Students Union)
Dr Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Hillary Gyebi-Ababio (NUS)
Nicholas Holland (Office for Students)
David Jones (Queen's University Belfast)
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)
Dr Arti Saraswat (AoC)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (Universities UK)
Harry South (Worcester Students Union)
Vicki Stott (QAA)

Apologies:

Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)

Secretariat:

Joseph Tennant

Item 1: Welcome from the Chair and apologies received

1. In the Chair, Professor Andrew Wathey opened the meeting and extended a special welcome to Jason Bunting and Harry South, attending for the first time as student representatives. Apologies received were also noted.

Item 2: Approval of the minutes of previous meetings

2. Minutes of the October and December 2020 meetings (**UKSC Min/16** and **Min/17** respectively) were approved by the committee without any changes.

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 was about to publish changes to its review methodology for AY 2021/22, which would be the last year the current method is used. Also to be published shortly were:
 - a circular on admissions, which would set out that HEFCW did not expect to see any “conditional unconditional” offers being made by Welsh institutions.
 - a report on the quality of student experience, that had been commissioned of HEFCW by the Welsh government. This would also be discussed by the Committees of Council in June/July 2021.

HEFCW had also been allocated two further lots of student-targeted funding (£10m and £40m respectively) that it was about to start the monthly monitoring of. Efforts were being made to ensure parity in how this funding was distributed across Wales.

5. DfE-NI had undertaken to provide a one-off, Covid-19 disruption payment of £500 to all full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland institutions. This was part of a wider support package of £37.7m that the NI Executive had agreed. DfENI had also written to NI institutions asking for reassurances on how they will uphold the quality of their assessment in the current situation and on clarity of communication with their students.
6. Asked whether the above £500 payment might also be offered to part-time students, DfE-NI replied that this was not possible but that the financial circumstances of part-time students were much more varied than for full-time ones. However, other elements of their overall support package were being made available to help part-time and international students in Northern Ireland.
7. OfS had sent out a letter to registered providers on 14 January 2021 setting out further guidance on regulation during the latest lockdown and recently provided further information to student unions on the role in regulation played by notifications. OfS had received many responses to its recent consultation on quality and standards and was in the process of reviewing these. Further discussions with Advance HE about the external examiners training course were also underway, (see agenda item 6).
8. SFC had been focussing on working through its plans for the current academic year and undertaking initial thinking for the next. There was an awareness that universities were under tremendous pressure at the moment. Phase 2 of the SFC’s review into coherent and sustainable provision of HE in Scotland was underway, with 7 different themes but with student engagement underpinning all of them.

Item 4: Update from student members

9. The Chair invited the NUS to update the committee on any concerns and important developments from the student community.
10. NUS identified the following as its priorities:
 - **Student progression within / completion of their qualifications.** In particular, what form of safety nets were being offered to succeed last year’s no-detriment policies and what was being done to help those students studying for professional qualifications involving PSRB accreditation, where practical elements are essential.

- **Academic support packages.** NUS noted there was not a consistent approach across the sector, with differences emerging both locally and between UK nations in the student support measures being offered by different universities.
- **Essay mills.** NUS had been closely involved in recent work by the QAA tackling the threat to standards and students' welfare posed by essay mills. (See also agenda item 8).

Item 5: Quality assurance challenges arising due to the pandemic

11. The Chair opened this discussion by noting that:
 - The future shape of the rest of this year was becoming clearer and AY 21/22 would probably be closer to normal, though still impacted by restrictions to some extent.
 - There remained issues of digital poverty inhibiting some students' access to learning and the pandemic had exacerbated pre-existing inequalities.
 - There remained issues to be resolved around what academic mitigation policies should supersede the "no detriment" ones from last year.

12. There was a discussion of whether greater consistency could be achieved within the HE sector and between each nation of the UK in what mitigations were implemented to help students. It was noted that funding arrangements and Covid restrictions differed across the four nations, and that some subject areas face greater challenges than others. NUS felt it would be useful if there were a UK-wide set of principles agreed to by the HE sector, which would still allow some scope for local adaptation to specific circumstances or subject-specific issues, but nevertheless increase the level of clarity and consistency in what packages of support were being offered to students across the UK.

13. Several members spoke of the need to balance a flexibility of approach and the need to maintain the quality of the degrees being taught. This also meant moving assessments away from the "no-detriment" view of where students would have been, to more pragmatically assessing where they actually are. There were also concerns expressed for new students whose final year at school had been severely affected by national lockdowns.

14. This led to a discussion of the effect of the pandemic on data series used by the sector and it was noted that new HESA data had been released in January 2021. There were differing views on what trends this data could be illustrating, with some members cautioning against concluding that any increase in the numbers of high-class degrees awarded pointed to a relaxation of standards. However, there was a general agreement that the data for last and this year would inevitably be anomalous due to the pandemic's effect and would require careful interpretation.

15. The Chair concluded that it would be useful if, for the next UKSCQA meeting, a summary of progress on these issues could be drafted to reflect the latest situation, thinking and to point to where the UKSCQA could contribute further.

Action: This topic to be revisited and updates received at the next meeting of the UKSCQA.

Item 6: Update on Transnational Education

16. The QAA presented a paper to the committee (**UKSC 21/1**) which outlined its choices, and the rationale behind them, for which countries would be host nation destinations for

the first two years of the new Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK Transnational Higher Education (QE-TNE) programme. The selected countries were Egypt, Germany & the UAE for AY 2021-22 and China, Sri Lanka & Saudi Arabia for AY 2022-23.

17. In response to a question, the QAA clarified that in making these selections it had adopted a pragmatic view about when – given the pandemic – it would likely be possible to arrange in-person visits abroad, especially with those countries where links were less well-established.
18. The Chair thanked QAA for the paper and the committee confirmed that it concurred with the choices of country presented.

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

19. UUK updated the committee on recent work around the statement of intent. The committee welcomed news that English and Welsh providers had so far published 102 degree outcomes statements and UUK recommended that providers in England complete the template again this year to discuss AY 2019/20's results, with this becoming an annual process of self-reflection. Some minor refinements to the guidance for outcome statements were being worked on with the QAA.
20. There was a discussion of what future work would be useful and engaging with league table compilers was proposed. Also, the next steps in the strand of work on external examiners were considered. As previously discussed, (see UKSCQA minutes Min/16 and Min/17) the current project that funded Advance HE to deliver professional development training to external examiners is coming to a close in 2021. Though no new funding was available from the funders/regulators for future training beyond this point, OfS was in talks with Advance HE to develop a successor arrangement to secure the legacy of the investment made and which would allow universities to access training going forwards. Plans are also under discussion for a broader body of work to enhance the external examiner system and it was agreed this would be revisited in the next UKSCQA meeting once these ideas have evolved further.

Action: Next UKSCQA meeting to revisit plans for future external examiner training and associated work.

Item 8: Academic Integrity and Essay Mills

21. QAA presented a paper (**UKSC 21/2**) updating the committee on recent developments regarding essay mills and its own activities to protect academic integrity.
22. QAA remained of the view that, following the recent passage of new laws in Australia and Ireland that made essay mills illegal there, a similar legislative approach would be beneficial for the UK. It was noted that on 10th February, a new Private Member's Bill seeking to make essay mills illegal in the UK received its first reading in the House of Commons, though it was not yet known if this particular bill (proposed by Chris Skidmore MP), would be able to progress in the current session of Parliament. Additionally, it was understood that UK Government departments had been discussing the idea of a new law to ban essay mills in the UK, however there remained practical issues to resolve around how enforcement of such a law could be carried out.

23. The committee strongly welcomed the QAA's work on this important issue. It was suggested the Chair write to Chris Skidmore MP to express support and the Chair agreed that this could be helpful and would work on drafting a letter.

Actions:

- **Members encouraged to contribute further ideas for action on this issue to the Chair following the meeting.**
- **Chair will prepare a letter to Chris Skidmore MP.**

Item 9 : Any Other Business

24. No other items of business were raised.

Item 10: Date of the next meeting

25. The next meeting will be arranged for either May or June 2021, to be agreed via a poll nearer the time.

The meeting then concluded.
