

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Friday 21st May 2021 at 9.00am via videoconference

Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
Professor Mary Bishop
Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
Ben Elger (OIA)
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
Hillary Gyebi-Ababio (NUS)
Nicholas Holland (Office for Students)
Derek Horsburgh (Scottish Funding Council)
David 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)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (Universities UK)
Harry South (Worcester Students Union)
Vicki Stott (QAA)

Apologies:

Jason Bunting (Queens' Students Union)
Dr Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
Kathryn O'Loan (Scottish Funding Council)
Dr Arti Saraswat (AoC)

Secretariat:

Joseph Tennant

Item 1: Welcome from the Chair and apologies received

1. In the Chair, Professor Andrew Wathey opened the meeting. Apologies received were noted.

Item 2: Approval of the minutes of previous meetings

2. Minutes of the February 2021 meeting (**UKSC Min/18**) 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. SFC noted that following the recent Scottish elections there was a new ministerial team in place and a new program of government would be published in September. SFC's review on sustainability of the sector, commissioned by the previous Minister, is due to be published this June. A set of propositions for the two quality frameworks have been developed, and their publication in June will be the start of a process of sector engagement. SFC was also looking at the QAA's proposals regarding transnational education (TNE).
5. HEFCW reported a new Minister was in place in Wales as well. HEFCW had agreed that all institutions in Wales with TNE provision in a country being visited by the QAA will be included in some form. HEFCW had also agreed with QAA an amended review method for 2021/22, in light of the impact of the pandemic on providers, with a focus on assurance. It was also expected that by this July, all Welsh higher education institutions will have signed up to the QAA's new academic integrity charter.
6. DfE-NI was retaining its focus in dealing with the implications of the pandemic and noted the Northern Ireland Executive had recently approved the resumption of more face-to-face teaching. DfE-NI had also been trying to resolve travel issues for international students arising from Covid restrictions, as for some students the only route in and out of Northern Ireland had been via Scotland or England. A QAA project on enhancement had been proposed for June, and DfE-NI confirmed it was very interested in this as a building block for further work on its quality model.
7. OfS was continuing to analyse the responses to its recent phase 1 consultation on quality and standards. OfS was also in discussions with DfE on areas where its proposals might intersect with DfE's work on a lifelong learning entitlement. A new chair of the OfS, Lord Wharton, had also now taken up his position.
8. The Chair felt it might be useful if the four nations drew together a written update for the Autumn meeting giving their perspectives on, and summarising their recent activities in, reviewing their quality frameworks, to potentially highlight any common issues the committee should discuss.

Action: Funders/regulators to confer later in the Summer, with a view to bringing a short paper to the Autumn meeting.

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 its priorities as:
 - getting students back on campus and returning to more face-to-face learning
 - a desire for more clarity about universities' plans for AY 2021/22, with some having indicated they intended to remain online
 - the assessments taking place this summer and how they would be graded

- reflecting on the impacts of no-detriment policies, and any resulting lessons to be learned for how assessments are carried out in future
- examining any response to the Augar review that is forthcoming from the UK Government
- tackling essay mills, which were continuing to intensively market to students, especially on social media; (see also today's **Agenda item 8**).

Item 5: Quality assurance challenges arising due to the pandemic

11. The Chair opened the discussion by recalling points raised in February's meeting about the problem of digital poverty among some students, the pandemic's impact upon (and the interpretation of) data series used by the sector, academic mitigation policies in place for this year, and the NUS's call for a UK-wide, consistent set of principles for mitigation actions.
12. Discussing the pandemic's impact on the sector, members' points included:
 - It was challenging to unpick the full impact of the pandemic and of the "no detriment" policies from last year (as their existence will likely have affected student behaviours).
 - Longer-term issues included changes to assessment and a greater use of coursework. More use of online assessments was felt to be the clear direction of future travel, with this being an opportunity to modernise the sector's approach. However, current forms of digital assessment and proctoring still had many problems, particularly in ensuring equality of access for all students (both in terms of students' access to IT equipment, and issues with some of the software being used for provision and assessment).
 - PSRBs seemed very attached to traditional assessment methods. Some members argued PSRBs needed to be more flexible and hoped they would engage with development of new online assessment methods they could then have more confidence in.
 - There was concern over the amount of lost learning that students leaving school this summer will have experienced.
 - It was reported that in some subjects there had been a welcome refocussing of assessment on achieving a given outcome, with less prescription of how that outcome was achieved. There was also a call for greater focus on reviewing and improvement/enhancement of processes and UK alignment, alongside the current focus on degree outcomes.
 - OIA reported it had received 760 Covid-related complaints so far (460 in 2021 year-to-date), though this figure did not include large-group complaints. Against this backdrop, the number of academic and related complaints did not show the same increase – suggesting that "no detriment" and similar safety net policies had played a role.
 - There was a tendency for students to regard online provision as second-best compared to in-person, and this view had also been heard from external stakeholders, the media and some politicians. Several members felt there was a need to raise public understanding of the work done in enhancing online provision and of the sector's quality processes and protections.
13. In summary, the Chair felt the committee had a remit to:
 - look further at the cross-UK implications of recent developments,

- assess the pandemic's impact on degree outcomes, the UK quality code and the use of essay mills,
- discuss blended learning and assessment methodologies further.

Action: These topics to be revisited at the Autumn 2021 meeting

Item 6: External Examiners

14. The UUK introduced a paper (**UKSC 21/3**) entitled *Next Steps on external examining*, discussing how the sector might strengthen and enhance current practice in external examining.
15. In their paper, UUK:
 - remarked that next steps should balance supporting the sector in England to respond to the challenge laid down by DfE on classification outcomes (“grade inflation”) and reflecting UK-wide interests by enhancing practice in quality assurance in the pursuit of more reliable, transparent, and fair degree classification.
 - noted that since 2016, a total of 2,664 participants had completed the external examiner professional development training run by Advance HE. The project’s independent evaluation found the course had enhanced staff understanding of the role of the external examiner, increased confidence in their ability to carry it out effectively, and led to changes in their practice.
 - noted the future of this training course was undecided at the moment as the funded period was ending in July 2021.
 - felt there had not yet been enough coordinated communications activity to promote and explain the contribution of external examining, that practice continued to vary considerably across the sector, and that there was a need for more forward-looking thought leadership in this area.
 - presented as an option for discussion the possibility of developing a sector-led college of external examiners, (the details of which it outlined in a concept note).
16. The Chair opened the discussion by noting the progress made by the project and emphasising it was important that the sector continued to take ownership of the issue and show proactive leadership. The committee’s discussion saw the following points made:
 - It was important external examiner training also conveyed a strategic understanding of quality and standards frameworks in the respective nations.
 - Scottish members hoped to avoid further divergence by any nation from the UK quality code and stressed there were several motivations for looking at external examiners beyond just concerns in England about trends in degree outcomes, such as achieving greater consistency.
 - Independent HE was keen smaller/newer higher education providers be helped, and was concerned at reports that some institutions insisted that external examiners they used hold PhDs, with less value placed on relevant professional experience.
 - Student members welcomed that the external examiners’ role – particularly in encouraging consistency - was becoming more visible and better understood by students.
 - OfS was continuing discussions with Advance HE about securing the legacy of the five-year project on degree standards, and how it might support the training needs of the sector.

17. The funders/regulators were asked if they might be able to supply some initial “pump-priming” funding to allow the proposed “college of examiners” initiative to get started. Both OfS and HEFCW indicated they would consider doing so, but this would depend on the details of any proposal the committee agreed to, could only be on the understanding it was start-up funding only, and would be contingent on more than one nation’s funder/regulator agreeing to contribute.

Action: UUK to continue to develop the concept of a college of examiners, consulting with UUK & Guild HE members, as well as external stakeholders, over the next few months. Update on this at next UKSCQA meeting.

Item 7: Update on Statement of Intent matters

18. UUK updated the committee on recent work in advancing the aims of the statement of intent:
- UUK & GuildHE published a paper in April looking at degree classifications in AY 2019/20, exploring possible reasons for the observed six-point increase and noting that lessons needed to be learned in tackling attainment gaps.
 - UUK and GuildHE were recommending that institutions in England and Wales again complete degree outcomes statements this year, to reflect on the outcomes from AY 2019/20. 110 degree outcomes statements had been published for AY 2018/19 so far. A further stock-take of the situation with regard to degree outcomes statements is advised for later in 2021.
 - February 2021 saw a well-attended workshop, run by the QAA and supported by UUK, covering degree algorithm principles. Another workshop is planned for May to further embed these principles.
19. It was clarified that whilst it was up to the individual higher education institutions to decide if they wished to produce degree outcomes statements on an annual basis from now on, many in England had indicated they now planned to produce them annually.

Item 8: Academic Integrity and Essay Mills

20. Committee members reiterated their concern about the threat to academic integrity and students’ welfare posed by essay mills. Student members felt students were especially susceptible to essay mills right now, with the pandemic causing great stress and with much assessment now taking place online.
21. The committee heard updates from the QAA and its Academic Integrity Advisory Group on efforts to combat essay mills:
- QAA’s new academic integrity charter had been signed up to by 138 institutions so far. The goal remained to have all UK higher education institutions sign.
 - QAA had recently signed an agreement with the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) to facilitate an exchange of information and intelligence on use of essay mills by students.
 - Jisc and the QAA had been collaborating on new cybersecurity guidance for providers to prevent essay mills embedding their own adverts into university websites via cyberattacks.

22. The QAA strongly favoured the criminalisation of essay mills in the UK and had worked with researchers at Swansea University to develop a draft of a bill to achieve this. QAA had shared this text with Chris Skidmore MP, who had separately introduced a Private Member's Bill to outlaw essay mills back in February (as discussed at the UKSCQA's February 2021 meeting).
23. In February, it had been proposed the UKSCQA express formal support for the above bill with a letter to the MP who proposed it, but the Chair noted that - upon further reflection - it was decided not to do so. This was because not all of the member bodies that sit on the UKSCQA are able express a public view on prospective legislation. This particular bill had not received a second reading in the Commons before that session of parliament ended, so it was understood it would not now advance. However, in QAA's opinion there was a growing recognition in Westminster of the need for legislation. Should the bill be reintroduced, or if outlawing essay mills was integrated into other new legislation, the Chair confirmed he could potentially write a letter of support in a personal capacity if that would be helpful.
24. Strong support was expressed by committee members from across all four nations for achieving the outlawing of essay mills in all nations of the UK.

Action: QAA to update the committee about this topic again at the next meeting.

Item 9: Any Other Business

25. It was noted that Professor John Sawkins was today stepping down from his role as Scottish Sector Member of the UKSCQA after three years on the committee. This was also the last meeting for student member Harry South. The Chair and members thanked both Prof. Sawkins & Mr South for their contributions to the work of the committee during their tenures.

Actions:

- **Universities Scotland to nominate a new Scottish sector member to succeed Professor Sawkins.**
- **NUS to nominate a new student member to succeed Mr South.**

26. No other items of business were raised.

Item 10: Date of the next meeting

27. The next meeting will be arranged for Autumn 2021, to be agreed via a poll.

The meeting then concluded.
