

# UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

## Minutes of the meeting held on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021 at 10:00 a.m. via videoconference

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### Attendees:

Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)  
Alex Bols (GuildHE)  
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (University of Lancaster)  
Ben Elger (OIA)  
Joy Elliott-Bowman (Independent HE)  
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)  
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)  
Professor Clare Peddie (University of St. Andrews)  
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)  
John Rushforth (CUC)  
Dr Arti Saraswat (AoC)  
Dr Charlotte Snelling (Universities UK)  
Vicki Stott (QAA)  
Professor Claire Taylor (Wrexham Glyndwyr University)

### Apologies:

Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)  
Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE)  
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)

### Secretariat:

Joseph Tennant

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### Item 1: Welcome from the Chair and apologies received

1. In the Chair, Professor Andrew Wathey opened the meeting. Apologies received were noted. He also welcomed two new members attending the committee for the first time: Prof. Clare Peddie (St Andrews), and Prof. Claire Taylor (Wrexham Glyndwr). As well as being the new sector members for Scotland and Wales respectively, they also act as proxy representatives for Universities Scotland and Universities Wales.
2. It was also confirmed that NUS was working to recruit new student members to fill those currently vacant seats on the committee.

**Action: NUS to propose candidates for the two vacant student member seats to the Chair as soon as possible.**

## **Item 2: Approval of the minutes of previous meetings**

3. Minutes of the May 2021 meeting (**UKSC Min/19**) were approved by the committee without any changes. It was confirmed that all actions arising from last meeting were either covered by the topics on the agenda today or had been resolved.

## **Item 3: Update from funders/regulators and cross-nation matters**

4. The Chair invited the funders/regulators to update the committee on any relevant recent developments.
5. HEFCW was about to consult the sector on changes to its quality enhancement review method, with associated changes to its quality assessment framework.
6. SFC was currently awaiting ministerial response to its recently-completed review, but anticipated a positive response to its proposals on quality enhancement.
7. OfS reported its quality & standards consultation closed on 27 Sept and the responses were being analysed. It expected to publish its phase 3 consultation on student outcomes and the TEF this autumn. The OfS business plan for 2022-23 was also likely to be published shortly.
8. There was no report from DfE-NI for this meeting; (see apologies received)
9. The Chair noted that an English government consultation is also expected to be launched soon on the proposed lifelong learning entitlement. Given the likely reforms that could follow from this for England, he recommended the committee should discuss this area at the next meeting.

## **Item 4: Update from student members**

10. The Chair invited the NUS to update the committee on any concerns and important developments from the student community.
11. NUS had been analysing its latest student survey, which highlighted that student mental health remained a serious issue as the pandemic continued. NUS was keen that the imminent return to campus this autumn be done well and stressed the importance of good, clear and timely communication to all students; domestic and international. NUS had also been active in campaigning to ensure adequate financial support for students was available.
12. The student body was reported to be extremely pleased at the recent developments regarding tackling essay mills (**see agenda item 8**, below).

## Item 5: Quality assurance challenges arising due to the pandemic

13. The Chair asked members to raise any new issues arising since the last discussion of this topic. It was felt that while the sector was in a different situation to this time last year, the pandemic was not yet over.
14. There was a discussion about lessons learned from the experiences of the last 18 months:
  - With assessments coming around again, NUS said students were keen to hear how universities would pick up on the successful elements of the “no-detriment” policies from last year and what support measures will be in place this time round. NUS urged universities to, even if specific plans were not yet fixed, please set out for students the broad principles that would guide their likely response to any future pandemic-related crisis (such as a further lockdown).
  - OfS was concerned that information from English providers to their students had, in its view, not always been adequate and OfS was engaging with providers about this. Several committee members reiterated the importance of getting students’ feedback to better understand their experience, and of clear communications to help explain the choices providers were making to protect student interests. GuildHE felt that further feedback from students on their experience of hybrid teaching in particular, (i.e. classes where some students attend in-person, whilst others only virtually), would be helpful.
  - Over the summer, UUK had been looking at the lessons learned from last year and the impact of the increase in blended learning on attainment gaps. UUK would be publishing its findings shortly.
  - It was remarked that the pandemic had accelerated the sector’s direction of travel with respect to greater use of online learning. There was also a call for steps to safeguard recent improvements in digital delivery and to combat any mistaken perception that online learning was inherently inferior to in-person learning. In response to a question about how PSRBs could be further encouraged to help realise the benefits of new technology / digital teaching methods beyond the pandemic, QAA confirmed they were holding regular meetings with several PSRBs and had found them open to discussions on this.
  - It was noted that there was union balloting taking place at the moment, which had the potential to lead to industrial action at universities in the coming months.
  - GuildHE highlighted that the impact of the pandemic was now being reflected in widely-used data metrics, such as the most recent (2021) National Student Survey results, and that it would be worth considering the longer term consequences of this effect on regulating quality.
  - OIA mentioned it was in discussions with the English and Welsh governments to promote clear guidance for institutions on what practices would be viewed as acceptable and what could potentially lead to upheld complaints. OIA also noted that it had received 1100 specifically pandemic-related complaints to date.

**Action: Discussions between UUK, Guild HE, QAA to continue on these issues; particularly on the point about information to students.**

## Item 6: Quality frameworks across the nations of the UK

15. OfS introduced a paper, **UKSC 21/4**, outlining the desire of the four funders/regulators in the UK to develop a new, joint statement that provides a clear and coherent articulation of the commonalities of how higher education is currently regulated across the UK, and how

this ensures that the high-quality reputation of UK higher education is being maintained. This was felt to be timely given the changes to HE regulation since 2016 and the further proposed changes to regulation of quality and standards in the UK. The funders/regulators invited input from UKSCQA members on their proposed approach.

16. Members made several suggestions for this document, in particular that it should consider:

- That some partnerships between institutions cross national borders
- A strong commitment to student mobility
- Support for flexibility of provision, modular learning / micro-credentials and for students travelling with English level 4/5 qualifications to other nations
- Protecting student choice and agency
- A need for a definition of “high quality”
- The differing approaches across nations; (enhancement versus regulation with respect to a minimum baseline).
- That there may be some useful wording/ideas in European framework documents
- Who the target audience is for this document when choosing the type of language used.

17. The OfS thanked the committee for these comments.

**Action: The four funders/regulators to meet again in November 2021 to agree a draft text. Members were asked to pass any additional comments about the approach to the funders/regulators within the next few weeks. A full draft of this new document will be presented for comment at the first main committee meeting of 2022.**

#### **Item 7: Update about the UKSCQA terms of reference and next Chair**

18. The Secretary briefly updated members on some committee matters. Professor Wathey would be stepping down from chairing the UKSCQA in 2022, in parallel to his retirement as Vice-Chancellor of Northumbria University next May. The core members of the UKSCQA would therefore be meeting in the next few weeks to agree:

- a person specification for the new Chair,
- a person specification for the new role of Deputy Chair that it was previously agreed would be introduced,
- the recruitment process that will be followed for the above roles.

19. The Terms of Reference for the UKSCQA, (on which some work was done to update them just prior to the pandemic interrupting), would also be revisited in due course. The goal is for a new Chair, Deputy and updated Terms of Reference to all be in place by the midpoint of 2022.

**Action: Core members to meet and reach agreement on the above matters. An update on progress on the recruitment of a new Chair & Deputy Chair to be given at the next main UKSCQA meeting.**

#### **Item 8: Academic Integrity and Essay Mills**

20. It had recently been announced by the Department of Education that clauses outlawing the operation, and advertising, of essay mills in England were being introduced into the *Skills and Post-16 Education Bill* currently before Parliament. This news was widely

welcomed by committee members. Some members expressed disappointment this new law would only apply in England, but it was understood that parallel discussions were taking place in the devolved administrations to bring in similar laws as soon as possible, which would mean essay mills being outlawed across the whole of the UK.

21. It was suggested the committee play a role around helping to communicate the implications of this to students and the sector, and in bridging between the new legislation and the interconnected quality and standards issues. It was agreed that a further discussion in the new year around a new piece of work to these ends would be helpful.

**Action: Academic integrity to be an agenda item at the first meeting of 2022.**

## Item 9: Statement of Intent matters

22. UUK and Guild HE introduced their paper **UKSC 21/5** “*Upholding standards through external examining – a sector commitment*”, outlining their proposals for next steps on progressing the goals of the statement of intent<sup>1</sup>, and on external examiners in particular.
23. At the last UKSCQA meeting, the idea of establishing a “college of external examiners” had been discussed. However, subsequent feedback from UUK members was that the sector felt this particular option would be too much too soon. However, UUK and GuildHE affirmed they were keen to explore other ways to strengthen the external examiner role, improve processes and understand good practice whilst respecting national variation and institutional autonomy. In particular, UUK and GuildHE will work with QAA in developing a new UK-wide compact on common principles for external examining, which would then be appended to the UKSCQA statement of intent as a sector-wide commitment. QAA was assembling an advisory group of stakeholders to advance this project, informed by a literature review of previous work done in this space. It was clarified that the UKSCQA could act a point of connection by which the funders/regulators could input their views and needs on this topic as the work progresses.
24. The committee was reminded that the Degree Standards project, that has seen Advance HE deliver professional development training courses to external examiners for the last five years, was concluding at the end of November 2021. Advance HE had submitted to the committee the executive summary of their strategic report (**UKSC 21/6**), reflecting on the project’s achievements and with recommendations for future steps. The committee noted this report with thanks. OfS also expected that it would shortly announce legacy arrangements for how training could be offered to institutions in future, (under a different business model).
25. Looking at the statement of intent more widely, and following on from the progress review they undertook last year on the sector’s progress on these issues, UUK and GuildHE will also carry out a stock-taking review, to report in January 2022. This will incorporate a survey asking the sector about its intentions around publishing future degree outcomes statements, what use has been made of the principles on effective degree algorithm design (which were published last summer), and also compose some case studies of how individual providers had engaged with the debate.

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

**Action: Members to send UUK/GuildHE any further comments on this proposed piece of work. This topic to be revisited and progress reviewed at the first UKSCQA meeting of 2022.**

**Item 10: Any other business**

26. No other items of business were raised.

**Item 11: Date of the next meeting**

27. The next meeting will be arranged for February 2022, the date to be agreed via a poll.

**The meeting then concluded.**

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