

UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 7 June 2023 at 10:00 via Teams

Attendees

Professor Nic Beech (**Chair**, Middlesex University)
Professor Clare Peddie (**Deputy Chair**, University of St Andrews)
Eve Alcock (QAA)
Dr Alex Bols (GuildHE)
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (Lancaster University)
Charlotte Corrish (OIAH)
Dr Ailsa Crum (QAA)
Chloe Field (NUS)
Brian Green (University of Strathclyde)
Dr Nick Holland (Office for Students)
Derek Horsburgh (SFC)
Ondrej Kucerák (Aberdeen University Students' Association)
Chris Laity (Universities Wales)
Sam Maesschalck (Lancaster University Students' Association)
Claire Morgan (Cardiff)
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Alex Proudfoot (Independent HE)
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)
John Rushforth (CUC)
Dr Arti Saraswat (Association of Colleges)
Dr Charlotte Snelling (Universities UK)
Vicki Stott (QAA)
Dr Amanda Wilcox (AHUA)

Apologies

Professor Mary Bishop
Ben Elger (OIAHE)
Rebecca Morrison (Northeastern University – London)
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)

Absences

Professor David Jones (Queen's University Belfast)

Secretariat

Dr Laura Brassington (Universities UK)

Item 1: Welcome from the Chair / Welcome new members / Apologies received

1. The Chair opened the meeting.
2. Attendees consented to the meeting being recorded, and to comments being attributed to their respective organisations in the minutes.

3. Members confirmed that there were no conflicts of interest to declare.
4. The Chair updated the Committee that he has been appointed as the new Vice-Chancellor of the University of Salford and that he has been invited to Chair the NUS's advisory panel on tackling antisemitism.
5. Apologies were noted. The Chair recorded the Committee's thanks to Kathryn O'Loan for her work and welcomed her interim replacement, Derek Horsburgh. The Chair also welcomed Claire Morgan, the new Chair of the PVC Network in Wales.

Item 2: Approval of the minutes of previous meeting

6. The Committee approved the minutes of the February 2023 meeting (**UKSC Min/23**).

Item 3: Updates from funders/ regulators on cross-nation matters

7. DfE-NI noted that they are awaiting approval for the new quality model. They are hopeful that approval for the final settlement for their divisional budget will come through in the next few weeks.
8. DfE-NI noted that pressure from the NI Secretary of State to look at revenue-raising measures, which includes tuition fees, has impacted their funding review. The wider financial sustainability piece may dominate the policy agenda for the next year or two. Input from other nations and stakeholder groups may be required.
9. The Chair suggested that the Committee could curate some work around financial sustainability and quality in future.
10. HEFCW noted that their work on the postgraduate research student experience is coming to a close and they are expecting to receive the report this month. Once it is finalised, HEFCW will circulate it with the Committee. HEFCW noted that it would be helpful to have the report's conclusions on the agenda for the next meeting of the UKSCQA.
11. HEFCW is about to commission a piece of work on 'what is HE post-COVID' given the variability of approaches towards online/ blended learning. The work is to inform the move into CTER to ensure CTER has an up-to-date understanding of what HE is, and this will inform its policy decisions. HEFCW is happy to share this work with the Committee and put it on the agenda for future discussion.
12. HEFCW is moving towards CTER, with work around quality principles. Much of this work will need to be consulted on once CTER begins.
13. QAA is almost finished finalising the new Quality Enhancement Review Method. Consultation ends at the end of this week and the hope is for it to be published soon. QAA confirmed they are working towards this timeline.
14. OfS stated that they published a blog in early April setting out their approach to the next steps around setting quality and standards with the additional assessment work they are taking on.
15. They plan to publish further guidance on how they will assess B7 and B8 later this month and recognise providers want to see that.
16. OfS is working with DfE before the summer recess to arrange payment for those registrations and assessments, and they are looking for ways to progress assessments for providers as quickly as possible.

17. OfS would like to thank organisations contributing to their roundtable discussions about principles that can inform their approach to quality and standards assessments moving forwards. OfS recognises the interest of provider and sector representatives in how the OfS goes about this work and will communicate more in due course.
18. OfS is continuing to progress their quality investigations. The TEF is in full swing. The OfS thanked colleagues in the sector that contribute to that process and the OfS's other processes.
19. The Chair invited the interim representative from SFC to share any updates. SFC noted the item on the agenda on the tertiary approach. SFC stated they have recently commissioned QAA to develop a new external review cycle which will be an evolution to the enhancement-led approach.

Actions:

- The Chair suggested that the Committee could curate some work around financial sustainability and quality in future.
- HEFCW noted that it would be helpful to have the report's conclusions on the agenda for the next meeting of the UKSCQA.
- HEFCW is happy to share this work with the Committee and put it on the agenda for future discussion.

Item 4: Update from student representatives

20. Aberdeen University Students' Association discussed issues around the marking and assessment boycott.
21. Aberdeen University Students' Association noted comments from other unions around how expectations around ChatGPT have changed since the last meeting. There is a sense that ChatGPT is here to stay and even an expectation that it can be used in the workplace.
22. Aberdeen University Students' Association discussed concerns around changes to international immigration and how it will affect student populations. They noted questions around financial sustainability and protecting the wider student experience as part of wider quality work.
23. Lancaster University Students' Association noted funding pressures for postgraduate students, specifically concerns around how the situation will change for EU and international students. It was noted that the environment makes it more difficult to build diverse research groups.
24. Lancaster University Students' Association shared similar concerns about the marking and assessment boycott. It was noted that some postgraduate students feel under pressure to compensate for marking not being done by academic staff.
25. Lancaster University Students' Association reported on discussions around how ChatGPT could be used in theses. The differences between approaches taken by some journals and other actors were noted. A more coherent approach was called for.
26. NUS shared concerns around the marking and assessment boycott and mitigations put in place.
27. NUS echoed concerns around international students and pointed to NUS's work supporting the rights of international students.

28. Members expressed recognition of the issues and the work going on to mitigate risks wherever possible and ensuring assessment quality levels are maintained. The Committee agreed to keep a watching brief and acknowledged the work of QAA in this area.

Item 5: Infographic on regulation

29. UUK stated that the infographic is a working draft, the purpose of which is to receive feedback from the Committee. Since producing the prototype, UUK has spoken with UW, US, and UUKi and already noted amendments that will be made.
30. The idea behind the infographic is to produce something which reassures international audiences of the processes, checks, and balances that members recognise their institutions as having in place. It was noted that, given concerns around the marking and assessment boycott, the infographic could also be of use in assuring audiences about the range of procedures involved in setting up a course.
31. The authors are looking for feedback with the hope to publish the infographic with the UKSCQA logo; however, if it is not felt appropriate to do so, UUK, Guild HE and QAA can take it forward on their own.
32. Guild HE noted that the infographic came out of some earlier discussions around the UK-wide statement and articulating what happens within institutions to international audiences and others.
33. HEFCW shared the view that it would be important to host the infographic on the UKSCQA website, given that the UKSCQA is a jointly-owned Committee between the sector and regulators, and to help external parties to understand the processes.
34. The University of Strathclyde provided comments from Universities Scotland. It was noted that while paper 2 refers to the funding council predominantly from a funding perspective, it might also be helpful to add more about their role in oversight.
35. The University of Strathclyde noted that the infographic mentions 'courses' but perhaps the language should be amended to refer to 'programmes'.
36. Independent HE and AoC welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback.
37. OfS recognised that this is a piece of work intended to describe common features beyond regulatory requirements but have comments around some framing that they can feed back separately.
38. OfS would have some difficulty endorsing the infographic as part of the UKSCQA because it does not relate to functions as a regulator. Conversations will be picked up after the meeting.
39. CUC noted the absence of any mention of work done to develop staff which is part of quality assurance and enhancement. CUC confirmed they would be happy to have their logo on the infographic.
40. UUK welcomed the feedback of the Committee. UUK noted that the infographic had been approached from the degree awarding perspective, but that it is equally important to reflect on course design and delivery within partnerships as well.
41. UUK welcomed conversations and discussions about how the work will be taken forward.

Action

- The authors to update the Committee on how the infographic has progressed at the next meeting.

Item 6: Update on sector review of UK Quality Code led by QAA

42. QAA reported back on the discussions they have held over the course of the year on the Quality Code. QAA thanked colleagues for their engagement and support.
43. QAA has consulted with a range of sector bodies, groups, and networks; held three roundtables online with QAA members and non-members; and hosted two workshops, one in-person and one online, capturing the views of around 200 colleagues.
44. It was noted that some of the outcomes of the discussions included reiterating the positive value of the code on the sector, and the extent to which the code is still used. This was not a surprise in the nations where the Code is a key part of cyclical review work, but it is also still very much a part of activity in the English sector. It was noted that the concise front piece to the Code, which is valuable in helping engage non-expert colleagues in understanding what UK HE is about and what is important about quality and standards is helpful, but what colleagues wanted was the detail in the advice and guidance.
45. Another important piece of feedback was around making clear where the Quality Code sits in relation to other frameworks and other standards. There was a lot of interest in making sure the Code is very clearly aligned and oriented towards European guidelines. This was regarded as particularly important because it sits beyond the quality framework of any individual UK nation and talks to the international recognition dimension which is an important part of the Code.
46. Other feedback includes interest in the Code having an enhancement orientation, although there were differing views on what exactly that would look like depending on which nation colleagues were based in.
47. An area that still needs work is around the tertiary dimension – to what extent the Quality Code should capture a tertiary dimension, and what that would look like. Many of these questions remain to be addressed in the next steps.
48. The next steps are outlined in the relevant paper.
49. The Committee discussed the papers and presentation by QAA. The Chair endorsed QAA's concern to include the student voice throughout their consultation process through their student advisory group and network. QAA responded that student engagement could be foregrounded more in the Quality Code.
50. QAA reported that from the feedback received so far, QAA will prepare a working model for the next set of consultative activity. The three models prepared for the workshops were intended to be deliberately provocative.
51. QAA will prepare a working model and engage in further consultation. The aim is to publish the central part of the Code around February 2024 and they have a proposal to agree a timetable for reviewing the advice and guidance.
52. QAA stated that they view their role as a guardian and facilitator of the Code on behalf of the sector, who owns the Code. The strength of the Code is that it belongs to the sector. The copyright of the central part of the Code is held jointly between QAA and the UKSCQA, and the copyright for the advice and guidance is held by QAA but done on behalf of the sector. Who should be the final decision-maker is a question for the UKSCQA.

53. The Chair noted that the Committee has responsibility for the outcome of the work.

Action

- QAA to update the UKSCQA on progress in the next meeting.

Item 7: Tertiary education

54. HEFCW introduced the paper. The authors have mapped out HE quality against the pillars identified by HERA and identified pieces of work which need to be done in advance or by CTER. The authors were interested to find out how a UK quality position can reflect these tertiary positions by recognising that they are devolved decisions and processes, and how they fit within the UK piece and how best practice can be shared.

55. SFC introduced their part of the paper. SFC is keen to articulate the UK-wide narrative with a balance between the commonalities and differences in approaches.

56. The Chair invited comments from the Committee.

57. CUC proposed a conversation about common principles of academic governance across the sectors.

Actions

- A future meeting to explore levels of commonality in approaches to governance.
- HEFCW and SFC to update the Committee on developments.

Item 8: Updating the UKSCQA website

58. The Chair introduced the papers. The Chair suggested that some parts of the website can simply be updated while for other sections there is more conceptual work to be done outside of the main meeting in smaller groups in between main meetings.

59. HEFCW commented that it would be useful to update the website, as it is not currently clear who it is for and what its purpose is. There is more that can be done to promote the fact that it is co-owned between the sector and funders/regulators.

60. HEFCW endorsed the proposal to set up workshops to consider sign off, ownership, and other matters.

61. The Chair suggested there could be a core part of the website to which all members are signed up, in addition to pieces such as blogs and knowledge curation of matters not discussed elsewhere.

62. The Deputy Chair suggested there is a need to have a fundamental conversation about the UKSCQA's identity and purpose. The Deputy Chair suggested the website could be a place to provide information on changes in regulation and quality enhancement, as well as the tertiary approaches being developed in Wales and Scotland.

63. UUK agreed with the Deputy Chair and encouraged the Committee to discuss its USP. UUK noted the issue of resourcing this work as the Secretariat function is limited to three days per month.

Actions

- A half-day, in-person autumn workshop with preparatory meetings, to include student voices, to discuss the aims and objectives of the UKSCQA.

Item 9: AI and ai: public confidence in standards (QAA)

64. QAA reported that they have been working since the start of the year to support the sector to respond to the rise of mass generative AI tools. QAA have released two pieces of guidance to the sector: the first, in January, supported providers in the immediate pivot, emphasising clear communication with students around what is/ not okay, transparent regulations, and agility; the second, published in May, focused on actions providers can take in the summer assessment period and planning for next year.
65. QAA have held three public webinars covering issues around detection/ banning technologies; how it can be positively integrated into learning, teaching, and assessment; and how to redesign assessment. The webinars reached more than 2,000 delegates in the UK and internationally, and they continue to be watched online on QAA's YouTube channel. QAA is regularly collating resources from across the sector and their webpage operates as a resource for that.
66. QAA have been speaking at their own networks – PVC networks, college networks, student networks, and academic integrity networks, as well as gathering views internationally. They have noted that the adoption curve varies between countries.
67. On key learnings and takeaways, QAA noted that AI-generated output can be difficult to detect, with false positives having been reported. QAA noted that relying on detection is likely to be tricky in the long term because it is currently the least sophisticated it will ever be, and we are weeks away from the technology being integrated into common software.
68. The threats it poses to academic integrity, while real, are not wholly new in their nature, but this technology is exacerbating those threats. The work done in the past around good academic practice is still relevant, and only more important.
69. There are opportunities to integrate these tools as legitimate aids to deepen learning and students will need to learn how to use them in the labour market. Graduates that can use different AI tools effectively to make themselves more productive will be more competitive than those who cannot.
70. It is clear there will need to be a huge, strategic shift within institutions about how to upskill staff in order to educate students on critical AI literacy. This may be complicated by financial strains.
71. The sector will continue to reckon with the need to think critically about how and why we assess work.
72. The technology and all future iterations of it will risk exacerbating the digital divide – there is an access issue here.
73. There is need to be mindful of the effect of these tools in the context of grade inflation, the current degree classification system, and the baseline standards students are expected to be able to achieve.
74. There are unanswered questions around assessment given that so much has typically relied on assessing the output of the learning process. It should be done in a way that is accessible, not burdensome to lecturers' time or students' wellbeing.

75. Over time, we could see the consequences of a sector that is not responding consistently to this issue. We could see 'digital grads' and 'analogue grads' who were not allowed or trained to use these skills.
76. There are big philosophical questions around what it means to learn now, what is plagiarism, or post-plagiarism where hybrid/ AI will be the norm, and what the purpose of HE and the acquisition and application of knowledge is.
77. This work is all part of a watching brief for QAA.
78. AI will be releasing more guidance on assessment design for providers and hosting a webinar for QAA members on the implications of AI in research degrees. QAA continues to speak at sector events on the issue.
79. Aberdeen University Students' Association echoed the call for there to be an equal playing field across sector and between education systems.

Action:

- QAA to continue to update the UKSCQA on their work in this area.

Item 10: Update on student roundtable (Chair)

80. The Chair confirmed that a student roundtable will take place within the next fortnight, and the outcomes could feed into a potential blog on the newly-framed website.

Actions:

- The Chair to update the UKSCQA on work in this area.

Item 11: Ongoing impact of COVID-19

81. It was noted that the Committee's concerns have moved onto thinking around AI.

Item 12: AOB

82. There were no items for AOB.

Item 13: Date/ format/ location of next meeting

83. Members agreed to work out arrangements for the next meeting remotely.

The meeting concluded.
