UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 5th June 2020 at 10.00am via videoconference

Attendees:

      Professor Andrew Wathey CBE (**Chair**, Northumbria University)
      Eve Alcock (The Student's Union, Bath)
      Dr Dee Bird (SFC)
      Professor Mary Bishop (Executive Director, Wells Advisory HE)
      Douglas Blackstock (QAA)
      Alex Bols (GuildHE)
      Ben Elger (OIA)
      Nicholas Holland (OfS)
      Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
      Alexander Proudfoot (Independent HE)
      John Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)
      John Rushforth (CUC)
      Arti Saraswat (AoC)
      Professor John Sawkins (Heriot-Watt University)
      Dr Charlotte Snelling (UUK)
      Claire Sosienski Smith (NUS)
      Jackie Yip (Cardiff Student's Union)

Apologies:

      Dr Ben Calvert (University of South Wales)
      David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)
      Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)
      Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)
      Professor 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 welcomed members to the videoconference. The Chair explained that today's agenda would focus on the most urgent aspects of the UKSCQA's work that the committee needed to discuss in the current pandemic situation.

Item 2: Urgent updates on the current situation in the sector

2.   The funder & regulator members were invited to update the committee on recent developments in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. HEFCW reported that it was continuing to engage with institutions and its current focus was on seeking reassurances about admissions. SFC reported that it had recently been asked by Scottish ministers to undertake a major piece of work around the sustainability of Scottish higher education. OfS described that it had recently consulted on a proposed new condition of registration prompted by the pandemic; the feedback from which was now being processed. Further guidance for providers on several topics was also due to be published by OfS shortly.

3.   Student members were then invited to update the committee. The NUS reported that it was still campaigning for the Student Safety Net and was disappointed that some institutions had announced they would not be reducing their fees. NUS was asking how students could be assured that HE provision in the coming academic year would still be of the high quality required to justify this. NUS was also actively considering other areas of concern, including: student mental health, preventing harassment / bullying, and "no-detriment" policies. In particular, student members urged institutions to make students' representatives an integral part of the decision-making process on how provision would be delivered in AY 2020/21. There had been some instances reported where this had not been the case, with students' representatives having to lobby hard to secure meaningful engagement. The Chair agreed that institutions having student dialogue as they made their plans was essential.

4.   The committee discussed further issues around planning for AY 2020/21, and it was agreed that close communication between all stakeholders was very important. UUK and GuildHE described their work with their members to explore what a high-quality student experience next year should look like, and noted particular challenges around PSRBs'[1] views of courses delivered in these circumstances, and the difficulties in more practical subjects moving to a mixed, or fully-online, mode of delivery.

5.   The OIA noted it had started to receive some complaints explicitly relating to the pandemic's impact. OIA stressed it did not view its complaints procedure as a mechanism for fee adjustment across the whole sector, but emphasised that it was still going to be expecting institutions to consider all complaints fully and on their own merits. QAA highlighted the sets of guidance on different topics that it had published recently, and echoed the concern expressed around PSRBs, noting that perhaps not all of them yet appreciated that the disruptive effect of the pandemic would persist for some time. The Chair agreed that the impacts of current changes would likely be felt beyond just the academic year 2020/21, and suggested the committee use a two-year horizon for its thinking on these issues.

6.   There was a question about whether institutional review activity carried out by the QAA (usually requiring an on-site visit) would be able to continue via purely online means. QAA replied that planned review activity had almost all been postponed for now, with some exceptions made for certain tier-4 licence holders. (Some special, remote reviews had

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[1] Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies

been conducted for them because their licences would otherwise have been lost). HEFCW, SFC and OfS each indicated that discussions were continuing to explore solutions for how reviews and assessments could resume later in the year.

Item 3: Brief updates regarding ongoing UKSCQA work

7. The Chair began discussions of this item by noting the statement published by the UKSCQA on 4th May 2020 about its revised expectations for the publication of Degree Outcomes Statements (DOSs) by institutions in England and Wales. Recognising the extraordinary pressures institutions were under at this time, the statement asked institutions to now aim to publish their DOS by the end of the 2019/20 academic year if possible, but by the end of the calendar year 2020 otherwise. UUK noted that as the DOSs would now become available to review a few months later than originally planned, this would necessitate the formal review of the impact of the statement of intent being postponed in line with this.

8. UUK & GuildHE presented an update on the degree algorithms project (**UKSC 20/5**) that they had been undertaking for the last few months on behalf of the committee. This project had seen engagement with the sector via a survey, four workshops, a senior-leadership roundtable discussion and feedback from QAA's student advisory committee and Quality Advisory Network. Two draft outcomes were presented to the UKSCQA for comment and approval:

    - a draft of 6 key, high-level *Principles for effective algorithm design* (**UKSC 20/5 Annex A**), and
    - a supporting *draft research report* (**UKSC 20/5 Annex B**) summarising the results of the survey that informed the development of the principles.

9. The committee agreed that the principles were a very welcome and useful contribution. Many members praised them for striking a good balance between setting down shared principles and respecting the need for some diversity in algorithm design.

10. There was a query about when the publication of the principles should occur. The Chair's view was that the sooner the better, as it would be then available for institutions to draw on as they made future plans and would tangibly demonstrate the progress the sector has made on this issue. It was agreed that, when finalised, the principles document could be placed online alongside the pre-existing Statement of Intent (SOI). As was the case with the SOI, the documents will be published under the aegis of the UKSCQA. UUK volunteered to draw up a communications plan.

11. The Chair thanked the project team for their excellent work on behalf of the committee and asked members to communicate any further comments on, or suggested changes to, the principles and research report to UUK as soon as possible. This would allow final versions to then be agreed by the core members and a publication schedule to be put in place. UUK mentioned that their Board was meeting to approve the principles on 26th June and that GuildHE's executive was meeting in July, so any changes the committee might desire would ideally be communicated and incorporated prior to these events.

Action: **All members to communicate any further feedback on either the principles or the research report to UUK as soon as possible.**

Action: **UUK to collate feedback on the documents and prepare a publication & comms plan, to be agreed with the other core members once final drafts are approved for publication.**

12. In an earlier videoconference the committee had agreed that it would useful to convene a working group of current members to explore the "no detriment" issue in some greater depth. It had also been previously agreed that UUK, GuildHE and QAA should be involved in this group, and members who were interested in also being involved were invited to volunteer.

Action: **Members interested in joining the working group on the "no detriment" issue asked to get in touch with UUK/GuildHE/QAA to volunteer.**

Item 4: Academic integrity & essay mills

13. Revisiting this topic from the February 2020 UKSCQA meeting, QAA updated the committee that it had recently conducted two webinars on "assessing with integrity". Its work to update its guidance to providers had also progressed, but had unavoidably been slowed by necessary pandemic response work. The committee reiterated its view, formed at the previous meeting, that this was a topic of vital importance.

14. It was agreed that careful thought was required on what steps the committee could take, and that ongoing Covid-19 response work remained the top priority for the moment. It was further agreed that it would be most appropriate to revisit this topic in the Autumn in more detail.

Item 5: Horizon scanning

15. The Chair invited the committee to identify emerging challenges for the coming academic year(s), for future consideration.

16. Topics raised by members included:
    - Transnational Education, and the extent to which it might need to be "remade" in light of events;
    - Maintaining quality, and how to do so in a predominantly online teaching environment;
    - The move to flexible learning, and how credits should be assigned and recognised;
    - How to ensure sustained student engagement in assessing the quality of blended/online learning;
    - How to support new school leavers entering HE this year given the disruption to their final year of secondary education;
    - How to handle the anomalous values that this year will generate for various data metrics that will be referred to in years to come, and what this means for maintenance of standards.

17. On the question of interpreting the inevitably unusual data values 2020 would produce, OfS indicated that it had set out broad advice to providers on this in its recent '*Guidance for providers about quality and standards during coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic*' and it will seek to discuss this further with the English sector in future.

18. QAA reported that it had been working with various providers with extensive experience in distance learning, including the Open University, University of London, etc., to assemble a "taxonomy" of different provision options open to institutions looking to adapt their offering to the new environment. This would be published shortly.

Item 6: Any Other Business

19. The current student members of the UKSCQA, Jackie Yip and Eve Alcock, informed the committee that as their tenures at their respective student unions were due to conclude shortly, they would be stepping down from the UKSCQA following this meeting. Also, the NUS representative, Claire Sosienski Smith, said that she would be moving on as well, and a new representative from NUS would be appointed in time for the next UKSCQA meeting. The Chair led committee members in thanking the student representatives for their service to the committee during their tenures.

    Action: **NUS to put the Secretariat and Chair in touch with their new UKSCQA representative, and also nominate two new student members to fill the other two student member positions in time for the next meeting of the committee. As per the draft term of reference for the UKSCQA, these nominees should be drawn from more than one nation of the UK.**

20. There were no other items of AOB.

Item 7: Next meeting of the UKSCQA

21. The next meeting of the UKSCQA will be in early October 2020, to be held via videoconference.

The meeting then concluded.