

# UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

## Minutes of the meeting held on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2022 at 10:00 a.m. via videoconference

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### Attendees:

Professor Nic Beech (**Chair**, Middlesex University)  
Professor Clare Peddie (**Deputy Chair**, University of St. Andrews)  
Alex Bols (GuildHE)  
Professor Amanda Chetwynd (University of Lancaster)  
Ben Elger (OIA)  
Brian Green (University of Strathclyde)  
Nick Holland (Office for Students)  
Ondrej Kucerák (Aberdeen University Students' Association)  
Sam Maesschalck (Lancaster University Students' Association)  
Kathryn O'Loan (Scottish Funding Council)  
Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)  
Alex Proudfoot (Independent HE)  
David Rooney (Department for the Economy, NI)  
John Rushforth (CUC)  
Dr Arti Saraswat (AoC)  
Dr Charlotte Snelling (Universities UK)  
Vicki Stott (QAA)

### Apologies:

Professor Mary Bishop  
Steve Denton (Nottingham Trent University)  
Chloe Field (NUS)  
Charlotte Gorse (Istituto Marangoni)  
Professor David Jones (Queen's University Belfast)  
Jon Renyard (Arts University Bournemouth)  
Professor Claire Taylor (Wrexham Glyndwyr University)

### Secretariat:

Tom Rowe (Universities UK)

### Guests:

Ailsa Crum (QAA) [*speaking for item 7 and 8*]  
Claudia Stillard (OfS) [*attending item 6*]

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

1. Professor Nic Beech opened the meeting and introduced himself as the new Chair for the UKSCQA. Clare Peddie also introduced herself as the new Deputy Chair for the

UKSCQA, whilst Tom Rowe was introduced as the new secretariat. Apologies received were noted. The Chair welcomed two new members; Brian Green (University of Strathclyde) and Chloe Field (NUS), as well as two guests; Ailsa Crum (QAA) and Claudia Stilliard (OfS).

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

2. Minutes of the February 2022 meeting (**UKSC Min/21**) were approved by the committee. It was confirmed that all actions arising from the 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**

3. The Chair invited the funders and regulators to update the committee on any relevant recent developments.
4. HEFCW reported that it was working with QAA on a new quality enhancement review method which would seek to achieve alignment with Scotland and Northern Ireland. Also, HEFCW was expecting to publish its updated quality assessment framework in July. Following the formation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER), which would cover all post-16 learning in Wales, it was likely that an overarching framework would be developed to cover all post-16 provision. One of the aims of the formation of the CTER was to facilitate better movement of students through different learning paths.
5. SFC reported that it was continuing its review of sustainability and coherence in tertiary provision, focusing on commonalities across colleges and higher education institutions rather than differences. A first proposal on quality enhancement and assurance was being drafted for the Scottish Government. SFC was also looking at funding models that might support its approach to managing scale and maximising benefits through alignment with Wales and Northern Ireland.
6. OfS reported that it had published its business plan for 2022/23 and called for responses to its consultation on (i) student outcomes, and (ii) TEF assessments, requesting these by the closing date of 5 July. OfS also reported that it had announced a blended learning review to complement its regulatory work in this area and extend the range of engagement with the sector.
7. DFE-NI reported its concerns around the low budget announcement by the Northern Ireland government, and the potential ramifications for the HE and FE budget.

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

8. Student members began by expressing their concern about the level of support available for PGR students, particularly during the pandemic, and highlighted the importance of an accessible and improved system for measuring quality that incorporates the diverse experiences of PGR students. Whilst members identified ongoing activity to support PGR students, it was agreed that further work was needed to make this support more accessible and effective.

9. Student members highlighted the ongoing issue of engaging students with quality enhancement / assurance processes. Conversations to address this have been ongoing between students' unions. The student body was also discussing how institutional pandemic responses can be sustained in teaching and learning practices going forward.
10. Student members expressed concern over the cost-of-living impact on students, with UKRI stipends for postgraduates and funding possibilities for undergraduates not increasing with the rate of inflation. It was highlighted that students would have to do more part-time work whilst studying which could limit their engagement with the wider student experience, including quality and assurance matters.
11. Student members raised concerns about attitudes towards international students as a source of finance, and whether they were receiving the appropriate levels of support. Independent HE shared a link to UKCISA's International Student Charter, providing guidance on the fundamental principles for delivering a world-class international student experience.

**Action:**

- **Committee officers to ensure that PGR is included in all future student experience agenda items**
- **The secretariat will circulate UKCISA's International Student Charter under this agenda item at the next committee meeting for members to subsequently review the document**

**Item 5: Quality assurance challenges arising due to pandemic**

12. The Chair asked members to raise any new issues arising since the previous meeting.
  - The Deputy Chair noted the pressing issue of international students not being supported for distance learning at the start of the first semester due to visa allocation issues.
  - Student members highlighted the benefits of hybrid teaching and learning for certain students, but also emphasised the need to ensure that high quality, tailored provision was not burdening staff excessively.
  - UUK reported that it was continuing work on lessons from the pandemic, looking at positive innovations in teaching and learning strategies. Members agreed to support this work going forward, and UUK agreed to reach out to members as and when appropriate.
  - OfS reported it was beginning work on its review of blended learning and would update members on its development.
  - OIA reported that complaints were returning to pre-pandemic trends, with a movement away from service complaints to academic appeals.
  - It was agreed by members that it was important to reflect and develop best practice going forward. The Chair reflected on the dangers of trying to do everything, risking overburdening staff, rather than focusing on a sensible selection of innovations to teaching and learning.

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

13. OfS thanked members for their contributions to the updated paper **UKSC 22/4**, a draft of a Joint Statement authored by OfS, HEFCW, DFE-NI, and the SFC: “*Joint Statement on the UK-wide approach to regulation of higher education*”. OfS particularly thanked Universities Scotland for its redrafting which framed the most recent version.
14. Following on from the feedback at the February 2022 meeting, OfS clarified that the paper was intended for an international audience to showcase the UK’s regulatory approach. OfS also clarified the aim of the document was to supplement the messages from colleagues’ organisations rather than as a stand-alone document. OfS invited members to comment on whether they felt that the statement was a near finished product. Claudia Stilliard (OfS) joined the meeting to collate feedback from members.
15. The committee welcomed the updates in the paper and the increased focus on what unifies the four nations. The committee also welcomed that the document was shorter, higher-level and more accessible. Members made the following suggestions:
  - The committee agreed that that the paper should explicitly reference QAA due to their strong international reputation.
  - QAA suggested including information on the Quality Code and Subject Benchmark Statements.
  - The committee agreed that the paper should be published but not publicized, as it was intended to be a supplementary document.
16. It was agreed that the document would be updated then circulated with members for endorsement. Once finalised, it was agreed that UUK would publish the document on the UKSCQA website for members to promote and refer to.

### **Actions**

- **The Chair to invite members to discuss next steps for once the UK Joint Statement has been finalised**
- **UUK to upload the final version to the UKSCQA website**

### **Item 7 External Examining Principles**

17. Guest speaker Ailsa Crum (QAA) introduced paper **UKSC 22/5**, a set of principles for effective external examining: “*External examining principles*”. The principles were developed in partnership with UUK, GuildHE and an expert advisory group to support providers with best practice on external examining.
18. QAA had been gathering feedback from its survey and series of round-table discussions with students, staff, funders and regulators. QAA highlighted the increasing recognition of the role of external examiners and the development of a community of practice. QAA identified three priority areas for future work: firstly, to get a clearer sense of how the external examiner role is developing; secondly, how to optimise the value of having an external examining system; and thirdly, clarifying the purpose and value of the external examining role.
19. QAA invited members to provide feedback on the external examining principles:

- OfS noted that there were no external examining requirements in England and suggested that the document should clarify regulatory differences across the four nations. OfS offered to provide input into wording.
- Independent HE and AoC noted the importance of making sure the principles work for a diversity of institutions, including independent providers and FE colleges.
- It was agreed that principle 4 on knowledge and integrity be separated into two principles.

20. QAA agreed to update the document and circulate with members for sign off by the next committee meeting.

### Action

- **QAA to update the document for member sign off by the next committee meeting (*endorsement has since been provided by members via correspondence*)**

### Item 8 UK Quality Code

21. QAA presented paper **UKSC 22/6**, a plan to update the UK Quality Code to reflect the changing regulatory position in England: "*UK Quality Code – Scope and Structure*". QAA noted that making the revised regulatory position clear throughout all associated advice and guidance was an urgent task, but that it also provided an opportunity to engage with the sector on wider conversations about what form the code will take in future.

22. There was strong support for the plan, with members agreeing that it was necessary to revisit the quality code. Several members added that it was important to consider the tertiary context and discussed whether this could be included within the current quality code or as a separate document. AoC offered to work with QAA to provide insight on how the code is used by FE colleges. Independent HE also reported that it was working on looking at foundation partnerships and offered to assist on incorporating this into the quality code.

23. In the short term, it was agreed that OfS would work with QAA on the wording of England's changed regulatory position. In the long term, it was agreed that a timetable for revising the actual code, and associated advice and guidance, would need to be developed.

### Item 9 Grade inflation

24. The Chair reflected on the ongoing discussion around grade inflation during the pandemic. It was agreed that it was necessary to begin gathering evidence from institutions on improvements in pedagogy resulting in genuine improved student outcomes. UUK reported feedback from member institutions questioning whether the purpose of degree classifications needed to be revisited.

### Action:

- **Members to provide input to the UUK led project building the evidence base on grade inflation**

**Item 10 Equality, Diversity & Inclusivity / Awarding Gaps**

25. It was agreed that evidence would be gathered on EDI and awarding gaps as part of evidence-based activities exploring grade inflation.

**Item 11: Student voice and participation**

26. Student members were invited to discuss student engagement issues. It was agreed that their concerns had been covered in previous agenda items. The Chair proposed adding an item on student voice during the UKSCQA away-day as an opportunity to consider in more depth how students can be encouraged to contribute on quality.

**Action:**

- **Student voice and participation to be on the UKSCQA away-day agenda**

**Item 12: PGR assessment**

27. It was agreed that this topic was covered in Item 4 but would be revisited at the UKSCQA away-day.

**Item 13: Innovations in teaching and learning**

28. It was agreed that this topic had been captured in Item 5.

**Item 14: UKSCQA away-day**

29. GuildHE and UUK offered to host an away-day for members at Woburn House as a useful opportunity to reflect in more depth on the purpose and priorities of the committee. It was agreed that the away-day will incorporate the next committee meeting and be arranged for around September 2022.

**Item 15: AOB**

30. No other business was raised.

**The meeting then concluded.**

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