

Terms of reference of the Quality Council for UK HE

Introduction

Background

1. The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) was established in October 2016. It is an important higher education sector-owned forum for bringing all four nations together to discuss matters relating to quality and standards in higher education and provide a site of consultation, enquiry and learning including higher education providers, students, funder regulators and sector bodies.
2. This document supersedes the previous terms of reference for the committee, which required updating to take into account the significant changes to the sector landscape since 2016 and the group's role within this. It also reflects a change of name to the Quality Council for UK HE.

Purpose and role of the council

The role of the Quality Council for UK HE, presenting a united voice, is:

- to promote and robustly defend the quality of UK higher education and provide evidence to support this
- to act on behalf of the higher education sector, especially in times of challenge and change
- to build support for, and recognition of, UK higher education leadership in quality internationally
- to have oversight of the UK's shared commitment to quality principles and take a UK-wide approach, celebrating our commonalities across nations and regulator systems
- to work in partnership with students, with regulators and across nations
- to represent the diversity of the sector.

Membership

Composition of the council

3. The current composition of the council is published on the [Quality Council website](#) and attached to this document as an appendix. Members fall into four categories: core members, foundational bodies, permanently co-opted members and regular members.
4. The principal sector and student representative bodies which represent cross-UK institutional interests with responsibility for degree standards and student interests hold the status of 'core members'. These are:
 - GuildHE
 - the National Union of Students (NUS)
 - Universities UK (UUK)
 - Universities Scotland (US)
 - Universities Wales (UW).

The specific role, responsibilities and remit of core members are set out in the 'Memorandum of Understanding', available on the [Quality Council website](#).

5. Core members Universities Wales and Universities Scotland will usually be represented by proxy; in each case in the person of a specific, pre-existing regular member from each nation.
6. The four UK higher education funding/regulatory bodies hold the status of 'foundational bodies'. These are:
 - the Department for the Economy of Northern Ireland (DfENI)
 - the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) (until August 2024)/the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER)
 - the Office for Students (OfS)
 - the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

Foundational bodies actively participate in meetings and inform decisions, but are not voting members of the council.

7. There are also two bodies who are permanent members of the council as sector representative bodies for provision delivered in further education and independent and alternative providers. These two bodies are:
 - the Association of Colleges (AoC)
 - Independent Higher Education (IHE).
8. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is also a permanent member.
9. All other members of the council not holding the status of either core members, foundational bodies or permanent members hold the status of regular members. Regular members include the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA).
10. The council may, if it considers it necessary or desirable, co-opt, for a specified period of time, advisers or specialists with particular expertise.
11. Memberships held by organisations are represented by an individual staff member of each body, to be selected by the body as appropriate.
12. All members are expected to adhere to the [Seven Principles of Public Life](#) (the 'Nolan principles') and to act in a collegiate manner.

Student representation

13. The council will include three regular student members who specifically represent the student interest at all levels of study. This is in addition to the representation provided by the National Union of Students (NUS), which is a core member. These members shall be

proposed by the NUS, though do not have to come from student unions affiliated to it, and confirmed by the council chair. The NUS is encouraged to ensure a diversity of student experiences are reflected, including type of provision, level of provision and UK nation.

Representation of sectors in each nation of the UK

14. The council shall include at least one regular member from the not-for-profit university sector of each the four nations of the UK. Nominations for these specific members shall be made jointly by the sector representative bodies for the established sector, namely UUK/GuildHE.
15. UUK, Universities Wales and Universities Scotland will nominate members from each nation. Universities Wales and Universities Scotland's nominated members will become their proxy representation on the council. UUK will work with DfE-NI to nominate a member from Northern Ireland and will seek endorsement of UUK's Vice President for England and Northern Ireland.
16. GuildHE will nominate two members as sector representatives. An additional sector representative from an institution without degree awarding powers will also be nominated by IHE, and an institution from the further education sector will be nominated by AoC.
17. A member representing professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) will also be nominated, normally by QAA via the PSRB forum.
18. The final decision and appointment for these roles (paragraphs 13-16) is made by the chair and deputy chair.

Diversity representation

19. The council will also monitor to what extent its current membership is representing the diversity of the sector in terms of gender and ethnicity, and the secretariat will highlight to the chair and deputy chair if any proposed change to the membership would result in more than 60% of the council belonging to the same gender. Whenever a member steps down from their role, and particularly where a sector representative position becomes vacant, these factors shall be borne in mind in the selection of their successor, facilitated by the secretariat.

Term of office

20. Regular members will normally be appointed for a three-year term of office in the first instance. Members wishing to step down from the council prior to the end of their tenure should notify the chair, deputy chair and secretariat of this in writing. Sector members can be re-nominated for a second term of office.

21. Where membership of the council is through representing an organisation, in the case of a change in role or remit of the individual the membership will normally transfer to the new relevant person.
22. To facilitate continuity in the council's active projects of work as it moves to adopt these new terms of reference, terms of office for sector members will be three-year going forward, from the date of agreeing this terms of reference.

Conflicts of interest

23. When a member of the council becomes aware of any potential conflict of interest they have arising with any matter under discussion in a meeting, they should declare this at the beginning of the relevant agenda item. This will then be recorded in the minutes of the meeting and the chair will advise whether there is any problem with that member continuing to participate in the discussions around that agenda item.

Selection of a chair and deputy chair

24. The procedure for selecting and appointing a chair is that Universities UK will, on behalf of and in agreement with the core members, seek applications from eligible individuals to arrive at a preferred candidate they are confident will command the confidence of all the core members. The candidate should be drawn from the HE/FE education sector and hold a position at the vice-chancellor/principal level at their institution. Following the approval of the preferred candidate by all of the core members, the new chair will then be formally appointed at a meeting of the council.
25. The position of chair will typically be held for a period of three years with an option to extend for a further two years by mutual agreement between the postholder and a majority of the council including all core members.
26. A deputy chair shall also be selected and appointed, following a process the same as that described in paragraph 23 for the selection of the chair and with the same length of tenure (though the chair's and deputy chair's tenures do not need to share the same start or end date). The deputy chair will not be a current employee of any of the four funder/regulatory organisations represented on the council, but rather be drawn from the HE/FE education sector and, additionally, their home institution shall be in a different nation of the UK to that of the chair.
27. On occasions where the chair is indisposed or unavailable, the deputy chair may chair meetings of the council.

Decision making

28. Decisions will be made by majority consensus by core, regular and permanently co-opted members. Foundational bodies can inform decisions but do not have decision making powers.
29. There is no ability to veto. Objections can be registered but will not overrule consensus. The chair and deputy chair have the ability to make decisions based on consensus.
30. Decisions can also be made by correspondence as needed, to be facilitated by the secretariat.

Review of the council's membership

31. The membership of the council will be reviewed on an annual basis by the chair and deputy chair in discussion with the other core members to ensure that it comprises an appropriate balance of perspectives, skills and experience.
32. Should a council member either:
 - a) over an extended period of time, not actively participate in the council either through attendance at meetings or through engaging in substantive correspondence with the secretariat and chair, or
 - b) because of changes to their job or their organisation be no longer able to provide suitable representation for the segment of the sector they are intended to represent, or
 - c) act in an unethical manner such as to bring the council into disrepute,then - with the agreement of the core members - they may be replaced on the council by a new member, nominated and appointed in the same manner as if the previous member had stepped down.
33. A review of the membership structure of the council will be undertaken in 18 months to two years and at subsequent appropriate review points to ensure it continues to be appropriately reflective of the sector.

Remit of the council

34. The role of the council is to advise the UK higher education sector, with the input of the members and the oversight of the core members, on how to maintain high-quality and reliable standards at the UK sector level. In connection with these areas of work, the council provides a forum in which agreement can be reached between its respective members on core strands of work.
35. The council has no budget but work can be informally 'commissioned' by the council and published by the body (or bodies) who carries it out on behalf of the council.
36. The council can provide advice and make recommendations to funding/regulatory and sector bodies.

37. The council may give input to consultations, respond to government departments and make statements to the press on matters of HE quality as agreed by the membership.
38. The council may delegate authority to its chair and deputy chair to provide advice to others, and make decisions on its behalf, when the chair and deputy chair have previously received a clear direction from the council.

Financial arrangements for the council

39. All core members recognise, and accept collective responsibility for, the council's financial commitments.
40. Where costs are incurred which all core members agree are reasonable (for example, in the course of the council's project work), these costs will be divided amongst core members in the manner described in the Memorandum of Understanding between core members.
41. "Reasonable" costs in this context, and in the MoU, means those costs felt to be both necessary and proportionate by all those core members who would be paying.
42. Financial commitments undertaken through the council will be managed by the council secretariat.

Meeting arrangements

Frequency and venue

43. The council will usually meet three times a year, in January/February, May/June and September/October, subject to the chair and deputy chair's availability, though the chair may call further, ad hoc meetings if it is required. Meetings will ordinarily be held online via Microsoft Teams. Work may be undertaken by correspondence and between scheduled meeting dates.
44. In addition to or combined with one of the three meetings a year, the council will have an in-person away day annually, and availability permitting, to be hosted on a rotating basis in each nation where possible.

Attendance

45. Only members of the council have a right to attend meetings. When a member is unable to attend a meeting and would like to nominate an alternate, this will be at the discretion of the chair (requests should be made through the secretariat).
46. The chair and deputy chair may invite external speakers to attend part or all of a meeting, as appropriate. This may include additional colleagues from member organisations to speak to specific papers and/or individuals external to the council.

Agendas

47. Agendas will be owned by members and formed by consensus, through a call for items from the secretariat. The chair and the deputy chair will meet with the secretariat to agree a final agenda. The secretariat will undertake forward planning for the council's business wherever possible to give a more cohesive overview of the council's work in an academic year.

If key stakeholders are absent

48. In any instances where an agenda item requires a decision on what advice the council will agree to provide, but where one or more council members who represent constituencies that – in the judgement of the chair – are clearly affected by, or have a clear stake in contributing to, that decision are absent, then that agenda item may be tabled to the next full meeting for any required decisions to be made, except where that power has been explicitly delegated in advance by the member(s) who are absent.

Provision of secretariat

49. The council has a secretariat assigned by its members to support it in discharging its functions.
50. Tasks falling to the secretariat include:
- liaising with and brokering communications between members
 - organising meetings
 - coordinating the development of the agenda
 - meetings and communication with the chair and deputy chair to agree action plans arising from meetings
 - individual member engagement where requested
 - proofreading, formatting and circulating papers to the council
 - taking minutes of council meetings
 - maintaining the website, including minutes, news items and updates to membership.

Reporting of outcomes

Minutes

51. Meetings will be minuted and the draft minutes and actions sent for approval to the chair and deputy chair, and subsequently to the rest of the council. Usually these minutes will be prepared in good time to be approved at the subsequent meeting of the council.
52. The council will approach all of its work with the aim of full transparency. Once approved by the council, a copy of the minutes of each meeting shall be published on the website of the council. The form of the minutes that is made public in this way may be redacted in part, but only if appropriate to do so under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act (2000).

Provision of advice and recommendations

53. The council can provide its advice and recommendations to the funders and regulators, and to sector groups in the following ways:
 - a) Through providing formal written reports, following discussion at a council meeting
 - b) Through oral updates and discussions with representatives at the council meeting
 - c) Through the chair and deputy chair's action decisions between meetings, if delegated by the council to the chair and deputy chair.
54. The council may occasionally hold a workshop on a particular issue, with the workshop output published and disseminated to contribute to conversations about particular issues.

Dissemination and communications

55. The council will disseminate outcomes from its programmes of work via its website, and members of the council may wish to disseminate via their own websites and networks as well.
56. Key public communications specifically relating to the council's work (such as press releases) should be confirmed with all core members prior to publication and signed off by the chair.
57. Work 'commissioned' by the council will be published on the website of the body who carries out the work, with links on the council website to that work.
58. The council's outputs should be accessible and support the council's position as a trusted adviser on quality.

Information sharing

59. Any requests for information about council activities under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) will initially be referred to the secretariat, which will respond in line with statutory requirements applicable within the relevant nations.
60. Professional email addresses will be used and shared for council business including discussions undertaken by circulation. Members, and the secretariat, have a legitimate interest in holding professional email addresses for these purposes.
61. Members may discuss, in confidence, the council's agenda with relevant colleagues in their own organisations as required but undertake not to disclose the content of meetings, discussions and decisions publicly until minutes are agreed and published, and papers published, except where this is agreed by exception. Papers where wider sharing and dissemination is encouraged will be clearly indicated to enable discussion in nation before meetings.

62. Nothing in these terms of reference should be taken to override members' own respective obligations as regards data protection, freedom of information and any other statutory obligations.

Oversight

63. The council will report to the Guild HE executive and UUK board as appropriate.
64. The council will produce a high-level summary of its activities on an annual basis to coincide with its annual in-person away day. The summary will be shared with core member organisations.

Review of these terms

65. The council's terms of reference and/or effectiveness will be reviewed on an annual or as-required basis to ensure this keeps pace with developments.

These terms adopted by the Quality Council for UK HE in April 2024.

Annex A: Membership structure

