

**Fourth meeting of the Quality in Higher Education Group**

**Monday 6 December 2010**

**18<sup>th</sup> Floor, Centre Point, 103 New Oxford Street, London W1**

**Present**

**Members:**

Professor Philip Jones (Chair)  
Mr Alex Bols (Head of Education and Quality, NUS)  
Ms Ros Boyne (Academic Registrar, Birmingham City University)  
Sir Rodney Brooke (Chair, QAA Board) (arrived for later items)  
Professor Joy Carter (VC, University of Winchester)  
Ms Heather Fry (Director Education & Participation, HEFCE)  
Mr Matthew Harrison (Director Education Programmes, Royal Academy of Engineering)  
Ms Kate Little (Academic Affairs Officer, Manchester University)  
Professor Denise McAllister (PVC, University of Ulster)  
Mr Anthony McClaran (Chief Executive, QAA)  
Professor Jonathan Osmond (PVC, Cardiff University, and member of HEPISG, representing Professor Janet Beer)  
Professor Ian Robinson (QSN, Dean of Quality Enhancement, Edge Hill University)  
Professor Saul Tandler (PVC, University of Nottingham)  
Mr Clive Turner (HE Quality L&T Manager, City College Norwich)

**Observers:**

Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)  
Bev Thomas (BIS)

**Secretariat:**

Helen Bowles (GuildHE)  
Emma Creasey (HEFCE)  
Fiona Hoban (UUK)

**Apologies:**

Janet Beer, Ruth Farwell, Helen Gartley, Craig Mahoney, Joy Mercer, John Morgan, Aaron Porter, Lesley Sutherland, Tim Wilson.

**Chair's Welcome**

1. The Chair welcomed Kate Little to her first meeting of the group.

## **Minutes of the last meeting**

2. The minutes of the meeting held on 16 September were agreed as a correct record. There were no matters arising other than those already on the agenda.

## **Implications of the Browne review, and the government response (QHEG/2010/13)**

3. In introducing the paper, Emma Creasey noted that the paper focussed on the implications for quality assurance and enhancement in higher education of the proposals put forward in the Browne report and what was known of the Government's response to date. It would be helpful to have views to feed into ongoing discussions with BIS at Ministerial and official level on the development of the higher education White Paper.
4. The NUS had very helpfully provided a paper setting out some initial reflections on quality in a 'post-Browne' environment and this was presented at Annex A. That apart, in drafting the paper, the sponsoring bodies (HEFCE, UUK, GuildHE) had sought to present an analysis of the current proposals without taking up a particular position on these proposals, being mindful of the separate discussions still underway in different fora. However, the principles and objectives previously agreed for the quality assurance system, as revised and reaffirmed following the earlier consultation (HEFCE 2009/47), were re-presented to the Group (Annex B). The Group was also reminded of the work currently in hand to strengthen the quality system (Annex C).
5. Introducing the NUS paper, Alex Bols noted that the implications of a new 'marketised' system of higher education were still to be fully thought through. There were still too many unknown factors to be able to reach firm conclusions. However, as set out in the paper, the NUS would wish to highlight some broad principles which should underpin high quality higher education. These were:
  - A fair market – including not only good access to information, but also more scope for students to move between institutions.
  - Separation of funding and regulation – noting that the NUS strongly opposed the proposed new HE Council on the Browne model but could see a case for separate bodies with oversight of funding/strategic development and quality respectively.
  - Consumer protection - which might include not only a firmer and more direct approach to quality monitoring as heralded in Aaron Porter's speech of 11 November to the Student Experience Conference but also scope for revisiting the entitlement to award degrees under some kind of licensing system, perhaps on a ten year basis.

- Quality improvement – which might include more focus not only on means of external review but also internal review so as to make processes such as periodic review or annual course review more student focussed.
- Institutional autonomy.
- Academic freedom.

The NUS paper suggested a number of ways in which, building on these principles, the needs of students might be better met in a more market driven environment.

6. There followed a wide ranging discussion which included the points below.

i) It would be important to challenge the apparent assumption in the Browne report that quality in higher education could be solely market driven, and to set out the arguments accordingly. Likewise the apparent equation in the Browne report of student satisfaction and employment outcomes with measures of quality should not be allowed to pass unchallenged. The existing measures of academic quality had never been intended to act as drivers of funding.

ii) It was important to maintain a clear distinction between the quality of provision and the costs to the student of that provision. There was a wider interest for the UK as a whole in ensuring that standards could be maintained and quality assured regardless of the funding route that applied in any particular case. There remained a need for a robust and independent assurer of quality.

iii) Although there was a strong emphasis in the Browne report on the concept of student choice driving up quality, there was also some attempt (notably in Chapter 6) to look at other means of regulation and the maintenance of quality. There were concerns on the part of some members of the group that the statements about the setting and enforcing of minimum quality levels could lead to a national curriculum for some subjects in HE.

iv) The Browne report was very much focussed on England, little regard was paid to developments elsewhere in the UK or in Europe as a whole.

v) There was, rightly, an emphasis on higher student expectations but there was no recognition in the Browne report, or in the statements made subsequently, about the issues involved in maintaining the quality of provision against a reduced resource base in terms of total funding per student.

vi) Likewise, there was nothing in the Browne report about the different position and different relationships that existed for students on higher education programmes in further education colleges. Subsequent statements had not addressed the interests of these students - the statement made by the Minister on 3 November had appeared to associate further education colleges with 'new providers'.

vii) It was not yet clear what arrangements might be put in place to enable a government contribution to be made towards the costs of delivery for those programmes that might be seen as strategically important or more costly to deliver (programmes currently in subject bands A and B). This made it hard to anticipate the shape of the sector as a whole. However, even where direct support for teaching was to be entirely withdrawn, the taxpayer would continue to have an interest through the costs of the student finance plan and the extent to which repayments for the future would not cover the full cost of loans made.

viii) The arrangements in place for quality assurance had, historically, sought to maintain a balance between the autonomy of institutions as being responsible for the standards of awards made in their name and the need for public assurance and to secure stakeholder interests. It would be important not to undermine confidence in the arrangements by which independent judgements could be reached on the quality of provision and the means by which standards were assured.

ix) In terms of the regulation of the sector the Group was reminded that this went considerably beyond issues relating to quality and standards, including, for example, financial probity and the longer term sustainability of institutions.

7. Bev Thomas was invited to comment on the emergence of policy insofar as it was known at this stage. She noted it was not possible to anticipate the contents of the White Paper. While it seemed likely that there would be some level of structural change, a ministerial speech had already included a reference that there was a logic in maintaining both the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and the Quality Assurance Agency as independent entities. She thought it important that the quality arrangements in place for 2011/12 onwards should be seen to command respect within the sector and beyond. This would include the work already in hand to ensure that the information made available was credible and that quality assurance methods delivered real results and were not simply a matter of following a 'paper trail'.

8. The Group agreed that it was important to reaffirm the core principles that underpinned the development of the quality assurance system, reinforcing the importance of the assurance and enhancement of quality and the maintenance of threshold standards regardless of funding routes for students. That and the other points raised at the meeting should be followed up with ministers and at official level within BIS as soon as possible given the work in hand on the development of the higher education White Paper. While changes might need to be made to accommodate the new HE environment and the role of new providers, the quality assurance arrangements now being established had been designed to allow for more flexibility for future changes while being grounded firmly in a fixed set of principles.

#### **PSRB role in quality and standards (QHEG/201014)**

9. Matthew Harrison introduced the paper drawn up by the secretariat to the Higher Education Better Regulation Group to help explain the role played by Professional,

Statutory and Regulatory Bodies in higher education more generally and in the quality assurance system in particular. He noted that although he, UUK and a number of PSRBs had been involved in the preparation of the paper, including through discussion at the QAA's PSRB Forum, he was conscious that the term PSRB encompassed a large range of different kinds of body, many of whom would have very precise views of their particular function and remit. There was no such thing as a standard or typical PSRB.

10. In discussion, members of the Group agreed that the paper was very helpful in highlighting the diversity of the different kinds of body, thus reinforcing the need not to generalise about the role of PSRBs.
11. It was noted that it was still not possible to say with confidence how many PSRBs were involved in higher education provision. However, a survey of PSRB activity being conducted by the Higher Education Better Regulation Group would help meet this need.
12. There was discussion of the extent to which PSRBs might be concerned with outputs (for example in terms of professional competence) rather than 'inputs' (eg. staff student ratios). It was agreed that there was variation but that care was needed in the extent to which PSRB involvement could be used across the sector as part of the wider system for assuring quality and standards. It was suggested that it might be helpful to explore how the UK Inter-Professional Group (UKIPG) and the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) interact with HE. A question was also raised about the extent to which PSRB accreditation might be seen as representing value for money.
13. Reference was needed to the role of Sector Skills Councils. A query was raised also about the role of the HEA in accrediting higher education teaching qualifications and programmes. It was noted that the consultation recently published by the HEA on proposed changes to the UK Professional Standards Framework had raised some concerns within the sector – it would be helpful therefore if there could be some discussion of the issues at the next meeting. The secretariat agreed to discuss this with Craig Mahoney.
14. It was agreed that the paper on PSRBs was very well and carefully drafted. However, it was important to be clear on the audience. Although the aim had been to present the issues in 'plain English' and this had been as far as possible achieved, the complexity of the picture presented was such that it would be difficult for those not already familiar with the context to find a way through.
15. Prospective students needed to be able to identify what accreditation or approval of a programme by a particular PSRB meant in practice and how the system operated in terms of providing access to different careers or professions. PSRB accreditation had been flagged as one of the items to be identified in the proposed Key Information Set to be provided at course level. It was recognised that the task would not be

straightforward but an expert group had been convened to assist in finding a way forward.

16. Matthew Harrison and the secretariat of the HE Better Regulation Group were thanked for their input.

### **Terms of Reference (QHEG/2010/15)**

17. Fiona Hoban noted that the original terms of reference for the Quality in Higher Education Group had provided that they be regularly reviewed with the first review taking place not more than twelve months from the date of first operation. The terms of reference were therefore presented to the Group with some minor changes highlighted for consideration.
18. It was agreed that:
  - i) Further thought should be given to the use of the word 'promote' in the first line so as to determine whether that best reflected the nature of the Group's activity and the mix of remits encompassing both an advisory and decision making function.
  - ii) The proposed addition to Item 1 (i.e. 'at a time of rapid change in the funding and regulatory environment') should not be accepted.
  - iii) In Item 9 the reference should be to 'annual review' not 'regular review'.
  - iv) Further consideration should be given to whether it might be possible to include reference to the cross UK Professional Standards Framework as part of the context for activity.
  - v) Consideration should be given to whether it might be possible for the Group to be more clearly aligned with the core principles for the quality assurance system which had been previously agreed by the Group and recommended to the sponsoring bodies for approval.
  - vi) Membership of the Group should be presented in terms of the locus of the member (with the relevant name in brackets).
  - vii) Some minor typographical changes were needed including updating of the title of the QAA Concerns policy, changing of 'public' to 'professional' regarding PSRBs and changing TQI/NSS steering group to HEPISG.
19. It was agreed that the Secretariat should amend the Terms of Reference and re-present them to the next meeting of the Group for approval. It was also suggested that more consideration be given to how to ensure that the work of the Group was better known particularly with reference to the management of future changes in institutional review and the selection of themes. While the Chair had spoken at the QAA Members Meeting

and with Mission Groups, and would speak at the HEBRG conference later in the week, further opportunities for promotion of the Group's work should be sought.

### **Update on Current Work Strands (QHEG/2010/16)**

20. The paper on current strands of activity relating to quality and standards was presented for the information of the Group and to enable members of the Group to see how the various stands interlinked. The timelines shown in the Annex to the paper would be developed and added to as necessary, including information to reflect the work of the Student Charter Group.
21. A full update on the responses to the QAA's consultation on the draft Operational Description for Institutional Review would be provided at the next meeting. However Anthony McClaran was able to report that a good number of responses had been received, over 200 in total. The 50 responses to the shorter summary consultation were generally supportive of the direction of travel, including support for a more granular approach to judgement. It was not yet clear how far these views might be replicated in the responses to the fuller version of the consultation. Challenges identified included those relating to the process of arriving at judgements. The separate QAA consultation on possible changes to the Academic Infrastructure would have been issued by the time of the next meeting – it was agreed that it would be helpful to have a report on the proposals.
22. A query was raised about how far the proposed revised institutional review system would remain relevant under the new fees system. The Chair expressed the view that institutional review would remain relevant in the longer term - the strong public interest in quality assurance would not be overturned by the changes in fees. In the shorter term, it was certainly relevant to 2014-15 as it would not be until 2015-16 that the bulk of three-year students under the previous fees regime would have left the HE system. It was also positive that the new institutional review system could be more flexible than hitherto.
23. It was noted that the HESA Board had met on 3 December to consider findings from the review of the DLHE. An update would be provided at the next meeting.

### **Any Other Business**

24. No other issues were raised.

### **Date of the Next Meeting**

25. The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 26 January 2011.

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December 2010