

Minutes of the Sixth meeting of the Quality in Higher Education Group

Thursday 9 June 2011, 14.00 – 16.00, Board Room, Woburn House, 20 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HQ

Attendance

Members:

Professor Philip Jones (Chair)
Mr Alex Bols (Head of Education and Quality, NUS)
Ms Ros Boyne (Academic Registrar, Birmingham City University and Chair of ARC Quality Practitioners' Group)
Sir Rodney Brooke (Chair, QAA Board)
Professor Ruth Farwell (VC, Buckinghamshire New University)
Professor Matthew Harrison (Director Education, Royal Academy of Engineering)
Ms Kate Little (Academic Affairs Officer, Manchester University)
Mr William Locke (Head of Learning and Teaching, HEFCE) for Heather Fry (Director of Education and Participation)
Professor Craig Mahoney (Chief Executive, HE Academy)
Professor Denise McAllister (PVC, University of Ulster)
Mr Anthony McClaran (Chief Executive, QAA)
Professor Jonathan Osmond (Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education and Students, Cardiff University and HEPISG member, for Professor Janet Beer, Chair of HEPISG)
Professor Ian Robinson (Dean of Quality Enhancement, Edge Hill University and QSN nomination)
Professor Saul Tendler (PVC, University of Nottingham)
Mr Clive Turner (HE Quality L&T Manager, City College Norwich)

Observers:

Patricia McVeigh (DELNI)
Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)
Lesley Sutherland (SFC)
Bev Thomas (BIS)

Secretariat:

Helen Bowles (GuildHE)
Tish Bourke (HEFCE)
Fiona Hoban (UUK)

In attendance:

Stephen Jackson (Director of Reviews, QAA)

Apologies:

Professor Joy Carter, Professor Janet Beer, Heather Fry, John Morgan, Joy Mercer

Chair's welcome

1. The Chair welcomed the Group to the meeting. He explained that, when the date had been set, he had hoped to be able to discuss the Higher Education White Paper, which was likely to include a number of issues either directly or indirectly relating to quality assurance. Given the delay in publication, the White Paper would be a key focus of discussion at the next meeting in September.

Minutes of the last meeting on 26 January 2011 (QHEG/2011/09)

2. These had already been approved by correspondence.

Matters arising (not covered elsewhere on the agenda)

3. The Group noted the following:
 - a. Paras. 5- 7: The Chair confirmed that the **Institutional Review** handbook was published on 31 March 2011. There would initially be three judgments on: standards, quality and (as QHEG recommended) the 'enhancement of student learning opportunities'.
 - b. Para. 7 h: Anthony McClaran commented on the fit between the QAA's process for **Concerns about Standards and Quality in HE procedure** and Institutional Review. He explained that the Concerns procedure, which had been recently revised, was not routine, but allowed focused and rapid investigation of concerns. The findings could stimulate an Institutional Review and/or be taken account of in planned future Institutional Reviews. The Group agreed that it was very important for the processes to be seen as complementary and contributing to a quality assurance process which took account of risk.
 - c. Paras. 10-12: The Group noted that, following a further round of email correspondence with QHEG members in March 2011, the **first year student experience** had been confirmed as the theme for Institutional Review in 2011/12. This theme had been met with general support both from students and the sector.
 - d. Para. 22: The Group noted that the report on **student charters** had been published by BIS, with recommendations to the sector. A student charter 'or equivalent document' setting out mutual expectations of the institution and of students has been identified as a source of evidence for institutional review.

Outcomes of the QAA consultation on the Academic Infrastructure, oral item

4. Anthony McClaran explained that the QAA was in the process of revising and restructuring the existing UK wide Academic Infrastructure, and renaming it the UK Quality Code for HE (Quality Code). The new review method in England and NI required clearer reference points (in particular, relating to threshold standards), while the Quality Code should also be more prominent and accessible for students and the general public. The new Quality Code would be organised according to the student journey, in three blocks (quality, standards, information). Alex Bols expressed the NUS' support for this

approach. A steering group was overseeing the review, supported by specialist advisory groups on particular elements. Priority would be given to producing the new section on public information, and also to new chapters on student engagement and learning and teaching. The QAA was expected to publish a final report on the consultation soon.

5. The QAA was not aiming to complete all sections of the Code at the same time resulting in major new re-launch but rather to have a steady programme of development and implementation. Anthony indicated that the final report would include a timetable for the process going forward.
6. Ros Boyne noted general support among quality practitioners in the sector for the changes. Cliona O'Neill noted that the Code needed to remain UK-wide, and that a careful approach would need to be taken to public information, where requirements differed by country.

Institutional Review of HE: The judgment on PI (QHEG/2011/10)

7. The Chair reminded the Group that the QAA Board had already agreed that from 2012-13 institutional review of HEIs in England and Northern Ireland would include a judgment on the information provided by higher education institutions. However, the decision on how the judgment would operate in practice was delayed until the contents of the dataset were agreed. Now that HEPISG had agreed the dataset, this Group and the QAA needed to make a decision on how the judgment would operate, so that it could be announced in the HEFCE/ UUK/ GuildHE circular on public information to be published imminently. The Group had received, in confidence, a late draft of this circular, which would be subject to further revisions before publication. Jonathan Osmond explained the contents to the Group, and also commented on the outcomes of the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group held on 8 June 2011. In particular, he noted that technical guidance on the implementation of the Key Information Set would be published by HEFCE in September 2011 [*Secretariat note: it was subsequently agreed that the technical guidance would be published by HESA with a complementary HEFCE circular letter*].
8. Stephen Jackson then introduced the paper about the judgment on public information. He explained that expectations would be set out in reference points in the Quality Code, as discussed under the previous item. The Code would encompass expectations for the whole of the UK. QAA would also make specific reference to a definitive list of the information set for England which would be maintained on the HEFCE website.
9. Alex Bols from the NUS welcomed that reviewers would look at a wide range of information, not just pre-arrival (ie. not just the KIS).
10. The Group then discussed exactly what reviewers would be looking for. The judgments would be made as part of Institutional Review, not as part of a yearly desk-based review. The paper proposed that the teams should look at the accessibility, reliability, completeness and currency of the data. This would include taking into account the views of students, although it would be harder to do this for reviews in 2012-13 since students would not have had the benefit of KIS' before application.

11. There was some discussion about how far the team could consider also “utility”. One member wondered whether it would be problematic to judge utility, if the KIS was, as designed, not going to be very high value for applicants. Stephen explained that the reviewers, in making a judgment on utility, would not look only at the KIS. In addition, the Group agreed that the views of students as collected in Institutional Review could be fed into the evaluation of the KIS and wider information set. This point would be added to the circular.
12. The Group wanted to be clear about the audit question. It understood that the QAA would be considering the management of information, and how HEIs assured themselves about the completeness, currency and utility of the data. The QAA would not be in a position to make comprehensive statements about accuracy, nor would they assess the appropriateness of information against predetermined standards (eg. whether proportion of hours of guided independent learning was too high or too low). The word “management of” would not be included in the judgment, but would be clarified in the accompanying explanatory notes.
13. Stephen explained that it would be difficult for a small team of reviewers to assess accuracy, especially with reference to the KIS which would be primarily pulled together by HEFCE (or HESA in future years). HEFCE and HESA should have their own data assurance methods, eg. for the DLHE and NSS, and so review teams would not seek to comment on or assess the performance of other agencies that had responsibility for the processing and publication of information about individual higher education institutions.
14. The institutional review handbook had noted, subject to confirmation that the judgment would be graded as: ‘commended’, ‘meeting UK expectations’, ‘requires improvement to meet UK expectations’ or ‘does not meet UK expectations’. The Group concurred with the QAA, that it would be more appropriate to refer to national than UK expectations.
15. There was some discussion as to whether the four point grading structure should be maintained; in particular, the Group wondered how commendation would be gained.
16. Stephen explained that the Code would set out good practice on the management of information and, as discussed earlier, this would go well beyond the KIS. Clearly it would be impossible to go above national expectations in the production of the KIS, due to the standard design; however, the reviewers would also be looking at a much richer variety of information (eg. prospectuses, programme specifications and so on), so the QAA would be able to specify guidance for commendation in the presentation of data like these. Anthony McClaran reiterated that it would not solely be a pass-fail judgment on whether data was there/ not there, but that conceptually there was space for good practice. Indeed, the QAA was used to looking at a wider variety of information for the purposes of producing a comment on information in current institutional audit, and assessing how far these were delivered in order to be accessible and useful. BIS and HEFCE both argued that it should be possible to identify excellent practice in public information.
17. The Group seemed broadly convinced by the arguments, especially as the judgment would be about more than the KIS, and this would need to be

explained carefully. It was agreed that the Quality Code supported by the detailed Institutional Review handbook (to be revised by January 2012) would provide more information on the expectations as well as the guidance on how grades will be determined. Relevant sections of these documents should return to QHEG in December 2011 for comment before publication.

18. Clive Turner was concerned that the KIS would be a challenge for HE in FE. In particular, he was worried about where work-based learning would be recorded in the learning and teaching portion of the KIS.
19. The Chair sought reassurance about how the judgment on public information would be separated from the others on standards, quality and quality enhancement. In response, the QAA clarified that, for example, how an institution responded to its NSS scores would be considered in relation to the quality enhancement judgment rather than the public information judgment. The raw results of the NSS would be considered in relation to the quality judgment, as currently where significant issues identified by the NSS will normally form lines of enquiry in the review. The Group agreed that it was important that, with the move from two to four judgments, the judgments should be clearly differentiated.
20. The Group agreed that the Chair and Secretariat, together with the QAA, should finalise the wording which would report the Group's decisions in the joint HEFCE/ UUK/ GuildHE "provision of information about higher education" circular. This wording would note a four grade judgment on the completeness, currency, reliability and accessibility of the information provided by institutions and on the usefulness of the information to potential students, employers and the wider public. Reviewers will not be expected to make a judgment on the accuracy of the detailed information in the KIS. The circular should also explain the links to the Quality Code.
21. The Chair thanked the QAA for a useful paper.

Secretariat note: 'Provision of information about higher education: outcomes of consultation and next steps, a joint report by HEFCE, GuildHE and UUK', was published by HEFCE on 16 June 2011 as HEFCE2011/18.

QAA Review of Collaborative Provision (QHEG/2011/11)

22. Stephen Jackson introduced this paper. He explained that the paper was coming to the Group at an early stage of policy development, given that there was no intention to change collaborative provision review until 2013-14. However, it was helpful for the Group to have early sight, not least as collaborative provision has been identified as an inherently more risky area for quality, as the sector considered that further consideration of this area is needed, and as the nature and extent of collaborative provision seemed to be becoming ever more complicated.
23. The Group received the paper, and noted in particular the QAA's plan to consult on its proposals in October – November 2012. The Group also noted that this paper was closely linked with the next paper, which specifically looked at a particular form of collaborative provision: trans-national education.

Review of transnational education: Next steps (QHEG/2011/12)

24. The Chair noted that review of transnational education (TNE) was a UK-wide method, and that Scotland and Wales would have the opportunity to comment in other fora.
25. Anthony McClaran introduced the paper. He noted that there were now more international students studying for a UK HE award outside the UK than in-country. While the volume and visibility of UK TNE has grown significantly over the past couple of years, there had not been a concomitant growth in the QAA's resource for associated quality assurance activities. Due to the very large numbers involved, a method similar to Institutional Review would be very expensive. However, the current system of TNE review was not necessarily fit for purpose, especially given the importance of the UK HE brand, and so the QAA were at an early stage of thinking about a successor to overseas audit. The QAA was also making immediate changes to overseas audit to reflect these concerns. For example the TNE China review was moving towards a more substantial intelligence based approach centred on a series of desk based studies and more in-country visits. The Group supported these.
26. The Group noted that TNE was a higher risk activity, with substantial reputational issues. For that reason, the paper was generally welcomed. It was noted that the sector needed good indicators of risk, and that there were some merits in the Australian model which might be considered. Desk-based review might not provide sufficient assurance. Cliona O'Neill highlighted the risk of looking only at higher risk TNE provision, as this could potentially give rise to a perception that overseas links were generally poor quality. She was keen that TNE review should look for outstanding provision as well as for any problems.
27. The Chair thanked the QAA for the paper and looked forward to continued discussions in this important area.

Progress report: 'Institutional review of higher education in further education colleges in England' (QHEG/2011/13)

28. Anthony McClaran presented this paper. He explained that the QAA's first draft of arrangements for Institutional Review of HE in FECs in England (to replace the current Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review Process from 2012/13 onwards) broadly aligned with the revised Institutional Review system for HEIs and thus reflected QHEG's key principles and objectives for quality assurance. In particular the draft identified the Academic Infrastructure (now Quality Code) as the key reference point for the system; retained the same judgment system – and grading - as set out in IR; and increased the role of students in reviews. The aim was for the review systems for FECs and HEIs to align as far as possible, while taking into account the difference between HEIs as degree awarding bodies and FECs as institutions responsible for managing the threshold standards of their HE programmes.

29. There was an issue relating to small pockets of provision which needed to be addressed. Clive Turner, as a member of the QAA's advisory group on the development of the successor to IQER, also noted that the FE sector understood the move away from developmental engagements.
30. The Group noted that a wider sector consultation would begin in October 2011.

Follow-on from publication of UUK/GuildHE Review of External Examining Final Report (QHEG/2011/14)

31. The Group noted the recent publication of the GuildHE/UUK final report: Review of external examining arrangements in universities and colleges in the UK.

Any other business

32. There was none.

Date of next meeting

33. The next meeting of the Quality in HE Group was scheduled for 22 September 2011 AM. Key issues would include White Paper and follow-on from Higher Education Academy's Consultation on the UK Professional Standards Framework.