

## **Third meeting of the Quality in Higher Education Group**

**Thursday 16 September 2010**

**HEFCE offices, 12th Floor, Centre Point, 103 New Oxford Street, London**

### **Present:**

#### Members

Professor Philip Jones (Chair)

Mr Alex Bols (for Usman Ali) (NUS)

Ms Ros Boyne (Academic Registrar, Birmingham City University)

Sir Rodney Brooke (QAA)

Ms Heather Fry (HEFCE)

Dr Stephen Jackson (for Anthony McClaran) (QAA)

Ms Charlie Leyland (NUS)

Mr Sean Mackney (HEA)

Professor Denise McAllister (PVC, University of Ulster)

Professor Jonathan Osmond (PVC, Cardiff University, and member of HEPISG, for Professor Janet Beer)

Mr Ian Robinson (QSN, Dean of Quality Enhancement, Edge Hill University)

Professor Saul Tendler (PVC, University of Nottingham)

Mr Clive Turner (HE Quality L&T Manager, City College Norwich)

#### Observers

Dr Cliona O'Neill (HEFCW)

Ms Bev Thomas (BIS)

Ms Lesley Sutherland (SFC)

#### Secretariat

Ms Helen Bowles (GuildHE)

Ms Fiona Hoban (UUK)

Emma Creasey (HEFCE)

### **In attendance:**

Gillian King (QAA)

### **Apologies received from:**

Professor Janet Beer, Professor Joy Carter, Professor Ruth Farwell, Mr Matthew Harrison, Mr Anthony McClaran, Ms Joy Mercer, Mr John Morgan, Mr Tim Wilson.

## **Chair's Welcome**

1. The Chair welcomed Jonathan Osmond, Stephen Jackson and Gillian King.
2. The Chair reminded the group that they had an oversight role in quality assurance policy, at a time when that was very high up the political agenda.

## **QHEG-2010-06**

### **Minutes of the last meeting**

3. The minutes were agreed.

### **Matters arising**

4. The Chair asked members to note that four of the items on the agenda were marked as not for onward dissemination, as they would be published at a later date.
5. The group noted that since the last meeting, its recommendations for action following the consultation on the future of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland had been accepted, and the outcomes circular had been published in July as HEFCE 2010/17. This outcomes circular gave a number of actions to QHEG:
  - a. Discuss the operational description for institutional audit with the QAA
  - b. Take a robust, evidence-based approach to any changes made in the audit method
  - c. Publish a protocol setting out: how 'minor' and 'substantive' changes to the audit method will be selected and implemented; and how themes will be selected
  - d. Hold discussions, as appropriate, with QAA, in order to ensure that the terms 'standards' and 'threshold standards' are clearly defined in all relevant documentation and to consider how institutional audit provides public assurance that threshold standards are being met.
  - e. Together with QAA, take respondents' comments and the outcomes of the public information consultation into account in considering how to operate a published judgement in the area of public information.
  - f. Work with the sponsoring bodies and QAA to take forward suggestions for further actions made in the consultation, including: improving public understanding of the quality assurance system; developing the role of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; and clarifying the role of academic staff in quality assurance.
6. Action points a-d were to be discussed at this QHEG meeting. Action point e would be considered by QHEG in the light of the outcomes of the public information

consultation in June 2011. Action point f should be taken forward in the medium term, but not overlooked.

7. Matthew Harrison from the Royal Academy of Engineering had offered to help compose a short explanation in plain English, with a subset of QHEG members and experts from a range of PSRBs, on the role provided by PSRBs in terms of accreditation of programmes and how this interacted with quality assurance, standards and the work of external examiners. In his view there was a complex interplay between these things which might be poorly understood in the sector. The group endorsed this offer. **Action: secretariat to take forward.**

8. A letter of specification had been sent from the sponsoring bodies to QAA setting out their requirements for the new institutional audit method, which was included with the paper on the operational description for reference.

#### **QHEG-2010-07**

#### **QAA Institutional Review of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland: Draft operational description**

9. Gillian King introduced this item. The draft operational description for institutional review (previously called institutional audit) had been developed in response to the commissioning letter, and would be published for consultation on 1 October 2010. She noted a change to the institutional review timetable, in that findings would now be agreed at the review visit, rather than afterwards, thus avoiding problems in reconvening the review team after the visit. Some of the questions would also be revised from those in the current version.

10. Rodney Brooke noted that although the document had not been to a QAA Board meeting, members had been sent the document and had made individual comments.

11. It was agreed that the document did meet the requirements of the sponsoring bodies' letter of specification, although Stephen Jackson noted that some elements were more difficult to address and so were taken into the consultation – the nature and wording of judgements was a particular case in point.

#### Judgements

12. Gillian King advised that, subsequent to the dispatch of papers to QHEG, the QAA had decided to take the words 'management of' out of the judgements. The reasoning was that if management processes were effective, outcomes should be at least satisfactory. QHEG members were concerned that changed language might mean a change in methodology or evidence required. QAA colleagues noted that this was not intended, and that the handbook would explain carefully the definitions behind the summary judgements and the processes by which the judgements had been reached.

13. Members noted that if 'management' were removed from the judgement terminology, then the judgement on 'threshold standards' presented a problem as they could not be more than 'satisfactory'. While some members preferred the clarity of the shorter judgement, they did not all consider that the review process as currently construed could support such a judgement, even with explanations provided by the QAA. It was agreed that the consultation should draw attention to this change and argue the case for it, allowing the respondents to comment.

14. It was agreed that the QAA would consult on the two proposed options set out in Annex 2a and 2b although there were some concerns that four gradations had potential to be used in league tables and that this had been explicitly ruled out in the specification letter. Another member considered that the intensity of the visit and the evidence would not support a more finely grained judgement, and that such judgements could lead to more gold-plating and more appeals. On the other hand, the NUS representative supported Option 2b and felt that there should be an 'excellent' option as well as 'good'. Others suggested that they would prefer another word to "satisfactory", as this did not seem sufficiently strong.

15. The term 'guidance criteria' in Annex 2 would be changed to 'guidance'.

16. The judgement on enhancement of learning opportunities was particularly welcomed.

#### Core areas and themes

17. Annex 3 gave helpful clarity on what would be considered for each area, which might be usefully moved into the main document.

18. The list of possible reference points in Annex 3b was given as guidance. The 'HEFCE research degree qualification rates' would be removed as it appeared anomalous to the other items in the list.

#### Other points

19. The group commented that the method needed to be able to cope with potential future developments such as increases in private providers and differential fees, which introduced a value for money issue (and potentially gave differential judgements a cash value). In response to a question about international provision, Stephen Jackson drew attention to consultation questions 2a and b, which asked whether and how review of overseas provision should be improved.

20. It was felt that employers were not adequately represented in the institutional review process, and that the system should be made more intelligible to them.

21. The final OD needed to take into account the results from the Academic Infrastructure evaluation (changes to be in place by July 2011, with institutions expected

to be engaging with the revised AI by 2012-13), the public information consultation (reporting June/July 2011) and the review of external examining (reporting early 2011).

22. Members agreed following the discussion about public information that it needed to be clear that a decision on how a judgment in this area would operate was dependent on the outcomes of the public information consultation.

23. In summary, the group congratulated the QAA on producing a good document in a short period of time, and looked forward to seeing the results of the consultation.

### **QHEG-2010-08**

#### **Protocol for QHEG involvement in institutional review**

24. Fiona Hoban introduced this item, explaining that publication of the protocol would meet undertakings set out in the quality assurance consultation outcomes circular to articulate how QHEG would manage its role in determining ongoing changes to the review method and in making decisions about the thematic element of review. The draft protocol would be published on 1 October at the same time as QAA's operational description.

25. Both QAA and QHEG members would be able to suggest themes, with the final theme for the year to be agreed by QHEG. Some members queried the decision to review only one theme per year, commenting that, depending on the chosen theme, it risked not allowing for institutional diversity and that QHEG should be able to respond if a particular issue arose that had implications for several institutions.

26. On the other hand, it was noted that QAA might have operational or logistical difficulties in managing more than one theme, and that multiple themes meant that not enough institutions might participate in one theme to generate robust cross-sector information. However, 'Outcomes' papers would still provide sector-wide thematic information gathered from review evidence. The HE Academy would also consider systemic issues, as would the proposed revised QAA Causes for Concern procedure (to be discussed under QHEG-2010-10).

27. The SFC observer outlined the current process in Scotland, in which sub-themes fed into one overarching theme ('undergraduates for the 21<sup>st</sup> century').

28. It was agreed that the draft protocol should be amended before publication as it was currently too vague about the number of themes per year, whether this would be one or more than one. The Chair agreed to take this forward with the Secretariat. The Chair agreed that further discussion was needed at a future meeting to provide clearer articulation of:

- the links between institutional audit/review and the Causes for Concern process
- operation of themes and possible operational or logistical difficulties.

## **QHEG-2010-09**

### **Consultation on public information**

29. Emma Creasey introduced the consultation on public information. HEPISG were responsible for making recommendations to the sponsor body Boards relating to the consultation, but as QHEG had oversight of quality assurance and would also be responsible for confirming how the formal judgement on public information would operate, taking comments from this consultation, QAA's consultation and the previous quality assurance consultation into account, they were asked to comment.

30. EC outlined the changes suggested at the HEPISG meeting two days before, including some restructuring and the removal of some questions. The main development proposed in the consultation was that a 'Key Information Set' (KIS) should be produced for each undergraduate course, containing sixteen items of information identified as being 'very useful' by potential and current students.

31. Jonathan Osmond added that HEPISG's message had been to 'keep it simple' but that there were concerns about the possible confusion of having a mix of different levels of information (institutional, JACS code, course level) in the KIS and the potential burden it posed.

32. QHEG members made the following comments:

- Some courses would be difficult to represent on the KIS, such as foundation degrees, work based and blended learning and part-time learning.
- The KIS might not appeal to non-traditional students.
- Would the KIS only capture information about the first year? HEFCE explained that one of the Expert Groups would look at this.
- It would be difficult to combine information across various modules on different degree pathways. For this reason, the KIS might need to give only indicative figures or a range (eg. on contact hours) as it would depend on the modules chosen.
- The political pressure for more information on certain areas, especially contact hours, could not be ignored.
- It was important to be clear how the accuracy, completeness and accessibility of the information was to be determined.
- How would the KIS link with the HEAR? For example, if they both described the same thing eg. learning and teaching methods, then the same typology should be used.
- The division of responsibility between QHEG and HEPISG when the information was revised needed to be clarified. QHEG were concerned that the information set should not be added to, but that it would need to be kept under annual review.
- The discussions with UCAS about its role in publicising the KIS were important.
- There was general unease about the proposed indicator relating to Student Unions and whether it was actually what prospective students wanted to know.

33. The BIS observer commented that the tone of the document should not be complacent. The timing might be regarded as too slow so it was important to emphasise that information was already available but that comparability was being improved. Jonathan Osmond also noted that Welsh institutions might also want to prepare KIS if the proposals were taken up in England.

#### **QHEG-2010-10**

##### **Revisions to QAA's Causes for Concern procedure**

34. Stephen Jackson introduced the paper. He explained that the procedure was shifting away from handling individual complaints to more systemic or generic issues. He also confirmed that the QAA was in discussion with the external examining review group regarding how the Causes for Concern procedure might operate as an independent recourse for external examiners with concerns.

35. QHEG members made the following comments:

- The shift in focus was potentially very significant and, as this was being published for comment rather than consultation, it would be very important to emphasise what had changed.
- The revisions potentially put QAA in a more powerful, and therefore potentially more difficult, relationship with institutions, which would need careful management. Therefore the revisions should be discussed with the representative bodies.
- DEL NI had asked that some reference be made to an initial agreement with QAA to incorporate a Causes for Concern facility in Northern Ireland.
- The document needed to clarify whether QAA itself could trigger an investigation.
- While noting that the list of potential sources of evidence was not exhaustive, it might be helpful to state what characteristics would be looked for in evidence to ensure that it was robust.

#### **QHEG-2010-11**

##### **Updates on other work strands**

36. The paper was noted.

##### **Any other business**

37. The Chair noted that the Terms of Reference would be reviewed at the next meeting and asked members to send any comments to the secretariat by correspondence.

##### **Dates of future meetings**

38. For the next meeting on 6 December 2010, tentative agenda items included the Browne Review, progress on the review of external examining and on work on the

Academic Infrastructure, the role of PSRBs and a review of the group's Terms of Reference.

39. The following future dates were noted:  
26 January 2011; 9 June 2011; 22 September 2011; 15 December 2011.