

Minutes of the fifth meeting of the HEFCE/ DELNI/ UUK/ GuildHE Quality in Higher Education Group

Wednesday 26 January 2011

Board Room, Woburn House, 20 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HQ

Present

Members:

Professor Philip Jones (Chair)
Professor Janet Beer (VC, Oxford Brooks University and Chair of HEPISG)
Mr Alex Bols (Head of Education and Quality, NUS)
Sir Rodney Brooke (Chair, QAA Board)
Professor Joy Carter (VC, University of Winchester)
Professor Ruth Farwell (VC, Buckinghamshire New University)
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 Craig Mahoney (Chief Executive, HE Academy)
Professor Denise McAllister (PVC, University of Ulster)
Mr Anthony McClaran (Chief Executive, QAA)
Mr John Morgan (President, Association of School and College Leaders)
Professor 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:

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

Secretariat:

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

In attendance:

Stephen Jackson (Director of Reviews, QAA)

Apologies:

Ros Boyne, Helen Gartley.

Chair's Welcome

1. The Chair welcomed Craig Mahoney to his first meeting. He also noted that Alex Bols had replaced Aaron Porter as the NUS representative on the group.

Minutes of the last meeting (QHEG/2011/01)

2. The minutes of the meeting held on 6 December were agreed as a correct record.

Matters arising, including revised Terms of Reference (QHEG/2011/01a)

3. The Chair updated members on a meeting held with David Willetts (Minister of State for Universities and Science) just before Christmas 2010, which had included himself as QHE Group Chair, Anthony McClaran, Heather Fry, Mary Degg (BIS) and members of the secretariat. The meeting had been curtailed by the Minister's being called away to vote in the House, but had been helpful and positive, notably thanks to the opportunity to update the Minister on a range of current initiatives including public information and QAA's scheme for raising concerns about quality and standards. The Minister's main concerns had been:

- The responsiveness of the quality assurance system
- The availability of key information, particularly data on actual qualifications held on admission (as opposed to published tariffs)
- Concerns about standards and quality in HE (the QAA Chief Executive confirmed that information on the QAA's published procedure had subsequently been sent to the Minister).

4. The revised QHEG Terms of Reference were agreed.

Outcomes of the QAA consultation on the future of institutional review (QHEG/2011/02)

5. The Chair commented that this was a very good paper. Issues arising from it included the way judgements would be made, how flexibility would be managed, and how the thematic element would be addressed. The Group's role was to provide advice to QAA, although final decisions on the method would rest with the QAA Board, which would discuss the handbook at its March meeting. The method should take account of the requirements set out in the letter sent by the sponsoring bodies to the QAA on 3 June 2010 (and published on the HEFCE website).

6. Anthony McClaran and Stephen Jackson presented the paper, which they confirmed took into account all responses to the consultation (including those to the summary consultation). Responses had been generally supportive of technical changes. Discussion had been around 2 main areas: the wording/output of the judgements, and how the thematic element would operate.

7. In discussion the following points were made:

- a. The group noted that the words 'management of' had been reinstated in the judgements. However, the QAA were keen to emphasise that institutional review was not purely an analysis of a paper trail and that direct evidence was taken, including from students. It was agreed that the QAA and others needed to be clearer about what direct evidence would be considered, so that the method could be defended as robust. While some members were supportive of the inclusion of the words 'management of', it was noted that 'management of processes' was more difficult to explain and defend publicly, compared to reviewing actual practice. While members agreed that it was not appropriate to have graded judgements for standards (as they had either passed or not passed the threshold) it was less clear that graded judgements were inappropriate for 'management of' standards.
- b. It had been difficult to meet the requirement in the sponsoring bodies' letter to avoid a judgement system that could be used for league tables. NUS in particular would have supported more gradations. There was potential for four grades of judgement on quality and public information if 'commendation' were included, but the language for each grade needed to be sufficiently strong – 'partially met' might be difficult to distinguish from 'not met'.
- c. The BIS observer was concerned that the judgements proposed might be perceived as being too weak, and the sector still risked being accused of complacency. The whole package of measures in the quality assurance system needed to be strong,
- d. Some members were not convinced that 'enhancement' should have been removed as a separate item for judgement, and recommended that it be reinstated. Following some discussion, the Group agreed with this proposal.
- e. If the QAA Board agreed with the reinstatement of the separate enhancement judgment, and the preferred method of gradation laid out in the paper, this would mean that the institutional review method would provide a possible fourteen different judgements over four categories, compared to the current system's six judgements over two categories. This would represent a considerable increase in gradation and public information, but one which the method could realistically support. A number of members spoke in favour of the method of gradation laid out in the paper. There was some discussion about whether this would lead to the production of league tables, but the Chair noted that league table compilers would want annual data.
- f. The group noted that the details of the judgement on public information would return to QHEG in June 2011, following the decision of the sponsor body Boards about the information set.
- g. QAA should resist any pressure from the sector to increase the notice period for changes, and ensure it was firm on adhering to schedules; more than six months' notice would not be perceived by the outside world as responsive.
- h. Members agreed there were issues around positive presentation (making clear the range of information used to reach a judgement) and avoiding negative public perception. It might be helpful to publish an explanation of the changes from the previous system and the rationale for these. It would also be helpful to explain the fit between the *Concerns about Standards and Quality in HE* procedure and the institutional review process, given that the former offered a more rapid turnaround for investigating urgent concerns.

- i. It was agreed that the QAA's proposed way forward would be discussed further with the sponsor bodies, and that QHEG would receive an update following the final decisions to be made by the QAA Board in March 2011.

Protocol for flexibility in the quality assurance system for higher education in England and Northern Ireland (QHEG/2011/03)

8. Fiona Hoban presented this paper. She noted that it had been published as a draft alongside QAA's operational description. Very few comments had been received; those that had been had centred on concerns over how the thematic element would work, and the notice period for changes. As noted in the previous discussion, this would remain unchanged as a longer notice period risked the sector appearing unresponsive.

9. A small change had been made on paragraph 7 concerning criteria for identifying themes. This change was approved and the protocol was endorsed for publication alongside QAA's operational description, subject to approval by the sponsor bodies' Boards.

Thematic element of QAA institutional review (QHEG/2011/04)

10. Stephen Jackson introduced this paper, explaining that themes were expected to change every year and evidence from a theme put rapidly into the public domain. QHEG members had been previously invited to suggest, if they wished, ideas for themes, with written explanations for their choice. Only one such idea had been received, from Saul Tendler, relating to standards in degree classification. Members were invited to discuss this idea, as well as ideas proposed by QAA in the paper (paragraph 34), with a view to advising on the subject of a theme for the first year of institutional review (2011-12).

11. Members considered that 'student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement' and 'the first year student experience' (an enhancement theme in Scotland) were both particularly timely given the increased focus on the student as a key funder and driver of quality in the Browne review. It was noted that the NUS and HE Academy were working on student engagement, and would report later in the year, so the 'first year student experience' was favoured as the first theme, with the advantage of building on the experience in Scotland. It was noted that the protocol required QAA to 'clarify which external reference points relate to the topic, and the main foci of the thematic element of the review' (paragraph 12), as well as to explain 'why the particular theme is considered worthy of more in-depth analysis' (paragraph 8). Therefore, QAA agreed to work up further details about the rationale for and working of the theme 'first year student experience', with a view to QHEG formally agreeing the theme by correspondence. Members were reminded that the decision on the theme would remain provisional and confidential until it was published alongside the institutional review handbook and QHE Group Protocol at the end of March.

12. The degree attainment suggestion would be retained and considered later in the light of a report, expected later in the year, on the latest work from the Burgess Group on the Higher Education Achievement Report.

HEA Consultation on the UK Professional Standards Framework (QHEG/2011/05)

13. This paper was introduced by Craig Mahoney, who explained that the consultation on the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) had completed the previous week. Half of the responses were from academics and had shown a wide range of views. The extent to which the framework would be revised depended on the responses but it was not expected to be substantially different from that in the consultation, although it would probably be made more robust.

14. Some members were concerned that the consultation period had been too short and that it did not connect closely enough with the work of the QHE Group. However, it was noted that the consultation had a UK-wide application so caution should be exercised in linking too closely with the English system.

15. Alex Bols welcomed the HE Academy's engagement with the NUS.

16. It was agreed that, in line with the revised Terms of Reference of QHEG, QHEG would receive a further update from the HEA on the UKPSF, once the HEA Board had had the opportunity to consider the consultation responses.

QAA Consultation on the Academic Infrastructure (QHEG/2011/06)

17. Anthony McClaran presented this item. The consultation proposed that the Academic Infrastructure should become known as the 'UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education'. It would be simplified into two major groups of guidance; setting and maintaining threshold academic standards, and assuring and enhancing academic quality. The 'quality' part would be organised with reference to the student journey. Round table events had been held as part of the consultation; these had been well attended and a good discussion held around the issues. The consultation would close on 1 March.

18. Members made the following comments:

- a. The term 'learning opportunities' (used in the definition of 'academic quality') was rather awkward to use when trying to capture the range of student resources available; 'student experience' might be better.
- b. The proposed chapter B3 (Guidance for learning and teaching) needed more thought.
- c. Paragraphs 11-12 referred to a possible future Part C on information. This would need interaction with HEPISG and clarity on responsibility for information.
- d. The chapter on external examining might be a priority for future development, in order not to lose momentum on the current work in this area.

UUK/ GuildHE Review of External Examining (QHEG/2011/07)

19. Helen Bowles presented this paper. GuildHE and UUK had worked closely with QAA in preparing the report, which aimed to set out clear and consistent arrangements across the sector and therefore reassure students as to comparable standards. The report had been approved in principle by the GuildHE Executive and would be taken to the UUK Board. There was considerable ministerial interest in the report.

20. Members welcomed the report, commenting that it was robust and went a long way to meeting public concerns. Some comments were raised regarding the appendices, and it was agreed that these would be followed up outside the meeting. Alex Bols remarked that the NUS supported the outcomes of the review.

Update on current work strands (QHEG/2011/08)

21. Fiona Hoban introduced this paper.

22. Janet Beer noted that the joint work with the NUS on student charters had finished the previous week and recommendations were with Ministers, suggesting that the Minister might wish to revisit this area once the new funding regime was in place.

23. Clive Turner updated the group on a meeting of a QAA Advisory Group that he had attended the previous week, discussing the successor to Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER); a new method would start in 2012-13. He noted that:

- a. The new method would be as similar as possible to the institutional review method in HEIs.
- b. Because of the convergence of the two methods, it was not considered necessary to pilot the new method, as lessons could be learned from the first year of institutional review in 2011-12.
- c. There was a positive response to including student reviewers in the new method.
- d. Work was being done by MEG on benchmarking data for HE in FECs, and on considering a method for presenting benchmarking data for indirectly funded provision against the delivering institution as well as the validating one.
- e. The group had discussed the involvement of HEIs in the process, the working partnerships of HEIs and FECs and the different responsibilities of the partners.
- f. The review method might need to be adapted for colleges with foundation degree awarding powers.

24. The Group agreed that in June QAA should provide the group with a paper updating them on progress with the IQER successor. The QAA also agreed to provide an update on the review of collaborative provision and trans-national education.

Any Other Business

25. No other issues were raised.

Date of the Next Meeting

26. The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 9 June 2011.

EC

February 2011