Minutes of the first meeting of the Quality Assurance System in Higher Education Group

Thursday 25 February 2010, 1345 to 1530
Board Room, Woburn House, 20 Tavistock Square, London WC1HQ

Present:

Members

- Philip Jones (Chair), *Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University*
- Janet Beer, *Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University and Chair of the Teaching Quality Information/ National Student Survey Steering Group*
- Alex Bols (representing Aaron Porter), *NUS*
- Ros Boyne, *Academic Registar, Birmingham City University*
- Rodney Brooke, *Chair of the QAA Board*
- Joy Carter, *Vice-Chancellor, University of Winchester*
- Ruth Farwell, *Vice-Chancellor, Buckinghamshire New University*
- Heather Fry (representing Tim Wilson/John Selby), *Head of Learning and Teaching, HEFCE*
- Matthew Harrison, *Director: Education Programmes, Royal Academy of Engineering*
- Charlie Leyland, *Vice-President Education, University of York Students' Union*
- Sean Mackney*, Acting Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy*
- Denise McAlister, *Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Ulster*
- Anthony McClaran, *Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency*
- John Morgan, *President of the Association of School and College Leaders*
- Ian Robinson, *Dean of Quality Enhancement, Edge Hill University*
- Saul Tendler, *Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Nottingham*
- Clive Turner, *HE Quality Learning and Teaching Manager, City College Norwich*

Observers

- Cliona O'Neill, HEFCW
- Lesley Sutherland, SFC

Secretariat

- Helen Bowles, GuildHE
- Emma Creasey, HEFCE
- Helen Gartley, DELNI
- Fiona Hoban, UUK

Apologies received from: Bev Thomas (BIS), Joy Mercer (AoC), Aaron Porter (NUS), John Selby (HEFCE), Tim Wilson (University of Hertfordshire and Chair of HEFCE Teaching Quality and Student Experience Committee)

Chair's Welcome

1. The Chair welcomed members to the first meeting of the new group. He described the meeting as a set-up meeting, which would enable the group to agree their terms of reference and to receive briefings on their future lines of work. He noted that while the group had a substantial programme of work of its own, it would also be informed by and feed into work done by other bodies.

2. Other members introduced themselves. They agreed that the formation of the group was a welcome development that would bring together a number of interrelated activities and enable one group to have an overview of the whole quality assurance system for the first time.

3. In response to a concern about future attendance, the Chair explained that his availability had been the deciding factor for dates in 2010, but agreed that dates for 2011 onwards should be agreed by canvassing all members with a choice of dates.

Introduction from sponsor bodies (oral)

4. Helen Bowles (GuildHE) welcomed the formation of the group and its high-level representation of a wide range of organisations. Delegates at the recent seminars held to discuss the consultation on the future of quality assurance had attached great importance to this group and its ability to make recommendations which would have a major impact on the sector.

5. Heather Fry (HEFCE) explained that HEFCE had a statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of the provision that it funded, and was accountable to government. While there was already a good deal of collaboration between the various organisations working on quality assurance, the QASHG's higher level of representation gave it a huge role to play, not least in helping to maintain the momentum for change across all the different workstrands.

6. Helen Gartley (DEL NI) noted that DEL had the same statutory responsibility and hence their representation on the group was important.

7. Fiona Hoban (UUK) said that quality, standards and reputation were a high priority policy for UUK, and welcomed a formal group that brought representative and funding bodies together with a wider membership. She noted in particular the importance of the group's inclusion of colleagues from a professional body, a school and an FE college, as well as the two student representatives. It was also important that this group would be a standing group rather than one with a 'task and finish' remit (like the previous Quality Assurance Framework Review Group). The group had some real challenges to meet, as evidenced by the large number of recent reports which had made recommendations about quality assurance in HE. However, the group's terms of reference were powerful, and they had the real opportunity to recommend substantive improvements to the system.

8. In response to the introduction from the sponsor bodies, Anthony McClaran (QAA) commented that a number of groups, most notably the Select Committee for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills, had asked stern questions of the QAA

9. Charlie Leyland (NUS) noted the importance of safeguarding student interests and the need to be informed by students' views. The quality assurance system should be comprehensible to students.

10. The Chair supported the comments of the NUS and QAA, and noted that there was a need to change the language of quality assurance, and perhaps to review the questions being asked. He noted that the Minister for Higher Education, David Lammy, was enthusiastic and energised over quality assurance and felt the work of the group was important.

Draft Terms of Reference- to be agreed and then published (QASHG-2010-01)

11. Heather Fry introduced the terms of reference, explaining that they had been developed by an officers' group of the key stakeholders (AoC, DELNI, GuildHE, HEFCE, NUS, QAA, UUK). Members were asked to confirm that they were clear, unambiguous and to the purpose.

12. Members made the following comments on the Terms of Reference:

    a. Quality enhancement should be made more fundamental to the group's activities; if there was too much concentration on quality assurance this could be forgotten. Enhancement should be included in the group's title or else brought out more strongly in the first paragraph. **Action: secretariat to amend the Terms of Reference**.

    b. Some members queried the use of the word 'system'. The Chair explained that it helped to explain how different aspects of quality assurance (and enhancement) fitted together.

    c. Point 3, setting out the group's responsibilities for 'minor' and 'substantive' changes, would be very challenging, as would be setting the protocol for determining which was which. This will be brought to future meetings of the group.

    d. Point 7, on liaising with the HE Better Regulation Group, was important. This group should carefully consider costs and burden of any recommendations which they wish to make.

    e. Point 8, explaining quality assurance to a 'wider audience', would be a challenge. There were many different audiences with different information requirements.

    f. Members considered that the Terms of Reference might say more about employer and student needs from the quality assurance system. **Action: secretariat to amend the Terms of Reference**.

g. Quality assurance of public information was a key theme which could be specifically included. **Action: secretariat to amend the Terms of Reference**.

13. With reference to Scope, members commented on the inclusion of institutions' internal quality processes. The group was mainly concerned with the bigger national framework in which these internal processes operated, and so had only an indirect bearing on internal quality processes. However, over time it might be possible to see how individual organisations worked within the framework.

14. The Scottish and Welsh observers commented that the asterisks in the bulleted list defining the Quality Assurance System could perhaps be reversed to indicate a process applying only to England and/or Northern Ireland. For example, institutions' own internal quality assurance processes are UK-wide but guidance varies from country to country. **Action: secretariat to amend the Terms of Reference.**

Introduction to consultation 'Future Arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland' (HEFCE 2009/47) (QASHG-2010-02)

15. Fiona Hoban gave a presentation *(attached)* outlining the key points of the consultation document. She explained that the consultation did not include operational detail of a revised institutional audit method, as this was for the QAA to develop in accordance with the key principles and objectives identified by the sponsoring bodies.

16. Fiona described how the QASHG would, at its next meeting on 26 March, consider the analysis of the responses and a paper setting out recommendations. The QASHG would then need to agree what recommendations should be put to the UUK Board (23 April), HEFCE Board (6 May) and GuildHE Executive (13 May), in order that a joint way forward should be agreed.

17. Members made the following observations:

a. The Chair particularly noted the tension between the need to address a wider audience and the technical nature of reports. He also considered it was difficult to explain the Academic Infrastructure, which had been notably missing from the evidence given to the IUSS Select Committee.

b. With reference to consultation question 7, Cliona O'Neill commented that the quality assurance method in Welsh HEIs had initially included a judgement on public information, but this had been changed to a comment as it had been too difficult to make accurate judgements.

c. The Group asked what would happen between the QASHG's discussion of the consultation findings on 26 March and their next meeting in September. The secretariat explained that on 26 March the QASHG would see a draft of the analysis paper to be put to the sponsors' Boards. Their comments on this draft paper would then be incorporated into a final version. Members wished to see and comment on the final version before it went to the Boards, if possible, in particular if there were substantive changes to be made. The secretariat agreed that they would do this by correspondence if possible but that the tight timing may prove challenging. Members also agreed that they wished to receive a report on the outcomes of the various Boards' deliberations on the consultation findings.

Action:

- **Secretariat to prepare update report after the Board meetings, and circulate in May/ June**
- **Secretariat and Chair to consider further what the group's engagement might be between March and September**

18. The responsibility for "signing off" the operational description for consultation would rest with the QAA, but the QASHG would comment on it at their September 2010 meeting. Members also requested to see the consultation analysis and final operational description before final agreement and publication, again, this would be for comment not approval. This might take place at or around the December 2010 meeting.

Programme of work related to quality assurance: outlines and progress (QASHG-2010-03)

19. Colleagues provided updates on the workstrands as follows:

    a. Anthony McClaran told the group that the discussion document on the Academic Infrastructure had been published that day [http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10/default.asp]. Work needed to be done on the Infrastructure's visibility and consistency and its use within the audit method. This would help to address major public concerns about comparability. There would be every opportunity for QASHG to look at what came out of the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure. Anthony also noted that, where possible, the work stemming from the QAA's thematic enquiries report was being incorporated within other workstrands.

    b. Janet Beer informed members that the first report from Oakleigh Consulting on teaching quality information had been received by the TQI/NSS steering group that morning. This research would take into account some of the recommendations from the BIS 'Higher Ambitions' document on information for prospective students, and a follow-up letter from David Lammy asking a number of stakeholders to work together to improve information for prospective students. This would lead to a joint HEFCE/ UUK/ GuildHE consultation in Autumn 2010 on teaching quality information. Janet also considered that programme specifications might be improved in order to be more interesting and relevant.

    c. Helen Bowles explained that the group reviewing external examiners intended to publish a discussion document for the sector in late spring. The QAA also noted their work on role descriptors for external examiners.

    d. The Chair explained that discussions had just commenced on revising the method for Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in further education colleges and this would be added to the update as an additional workstrand in future.

    e. Fiona Hoban commented that the Higher Education Better Regulation Group would meet for the first time in April 2010. She hoped that QASHG engagement with this group would therefore commence towards the second half of the year.

Future meetings- purpose and timing

20. The dates of future meetings were as follows:
    - 26 March- to agree the recommendations which will go to the sponsor bodies
    - 16 September - to consider the QAA's operational description before publication
    - 6 December –business to be confirmed.

Any Other Business

21. The Chair would reflect further on the protocol with regard to sending alternates to the meeting, and circulate a note. **Action: Chair and secretariat.**

22. Anthony McClaran noted that the Higher Ambitions document had charged the QAA with developing a robust complaints process and he would like to bring that work to the group in future.