



# Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

## One hundred and seventeenth meeting of the Board of Directors

Confirmed minutes of the meeting on 11 March 2020, 9.30-12.15

### Open business

#### Present

**Board Members:** Professor Simon Gaskell (Chair) Mr Matt Adie  
Dr Vanessa Davies Ms Sara Drake  
Ms Linda Duncan (Vice-Chair)\* Professor Maria Hinfelaar  
Mr Oliver Johnson Ms Denise McAlister  
Professor Craig Mahoney Professor Sue Rigby  
Professor John Sawkins\* Ms Claire Sosienki Smith  
Professor Oliver Turnbull\* Mr Craig Watkins  
Professor Philip Wilson

**Company Members:** Alex Bols (GuildHE)  
Charlotte Snelling UUK, UWales and UScotland)

**Board Observers:** Ben Elger (OIA)  
Alex Proudfoot (Independent HE)  
Hannah Sketchley (NUS UK)

#### In attendance

**Officers:** Mr Douglas Blackstock (Chief Executive)  
Ms Caroline Blackburn (Finance Director)  
Ms Lisa Evans (Governance Officer)  
Ms Rowena Pelik, (Director of Strategic Projects)\* (for items 5 and 6)  
Ms Vicki Stott (Executive Director of Operations and Deputy Chief Executive)  
Mr Tom Yates (incoming Head of Corporate Affairs)

#### Apologies

**Members:** Angela Joyce  
Andrew Wathey

**Board Observers:** Jean Arnold (OfS)  
Arti Saraswat (AoC)

(\*via video link)

## **Welcome and apologies**

1. The Chair welcomed members, company members and observers to the meeting. The Chair noted the new style of the papers and asked that Board members pass on any comments to the Governance team.
2. Apologies were noted.

## **Quorum and interests**

3. The meeting was declared quorate. No interests were declared beyond those previously notified and included in the Register of Interests.

## **Minutes**

4. The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a correct record.

## **Discussion items**

### Chief Executive's report (item 4, BD-2020-76)

5. The Chief Executive's report updated the Board on topics of interest and recent developments in relation to QAA. The Board noted that there continued to be a range of external policy drivers which would have significant impact on QAA and its future role. The Chief Executive reported on the meeting with OfS which had taken place the previous week and it was noted that this had been a helpful meeting.
6. The Chief Executive also provided an update on the effects of COVID-19 and the widespread implications for the sector as adjustments were made to learning, teaching and assessment. Medium-term impacts on provision and recruitment were noted. QAA's focus would be in supporting the sector with practical advice on quality and standards issues. Disruption to business - internally and externally - was being monitored and contingency planning was taking place. Advice for students was being considered amid concerns for the welfare of students and staff.
7. The Chair reported that there were considerable financial pressures on some institutions. Mr Watkins noted that there was a huge range of issues for institutions to consider including business continuity plans, student protection, academic calendars and student accommodation. Ms Hinfelaar reported that institutions were already considering what to do if the virus hit during the peak exam period. The Board noted that where requirements for final exams were rigid, that more flexibility may be necessary, including from PSRBs; it was anticipated that QAA could assist with advice and guidance. Mr Blackstock noted that most planned guidance was for degree-awarding bodies but QAA would also need to consider support for other institutions, including non-members.
8. The Board noted Mr Blackstock's report that the Chinese Embassy had been extremely grateful for the assistance Chinese students had received from UUK and UK universities in general. However, the impact of health-related restrictions on UK programmes in China and recruitment to the UK of Chinese students might be significant for the sector. QAA had drafted TNE guidance to support the sector in adapting.
9. The Board received updates on operational areas including Membership, Quality Enhancement and Standards, Quality Assessment England and Corporate Services.

The Chief Executive noted that since the last board update, the IT and projects team had been working to improve key performance indicator monitoring for designated quality body activity. They had also been working: to improve the user experience on the QAA website; on testing and documentation for a new reviewer extranet system; refining the requirements for new HR software; and on new marketing tools to communicate more effectively with members.

10. The Board received updates on issues affecting Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and on Europe. The Board noted that the draft legislation to create a new tertiary regulator in Wales was expected very soon. Mr Blackstock reported that he and the Chair had presented to the HEFCW Board on 23 January; this had been a highly productive conversation and the Board had supported the strengthening of relations between the two organisations. Mr Blackstock and the Chair had met with all the Vice-Chancellors and senior staff of Universities Wales on 5 February in Cardiff. A wide-ranging and helpful discussion had taken place on how QAA could support the sector in Wales.
11. The Board noted that the Northern Ireland Assembly was restored in January following a new power-sharing agreement. Diane Dodds MLA had been appointed as the Minister at the Department for the Economy. Political, policy and funding decisions could now be made, though it might be some time before higher education matters were considered in depth. The Chief Executive had written to the Minister on her appointment; her office had encouraged QAA to continue its dialogue with senior officials and the Chief Executive was assured that quality and standards were on the government agenda.
12. The Chief Executive reported on the work of International and Professional Services. The Board noted that there were detailed reports available on opportunities for work in Saudi Arabia, including a change in the law to allow UK institutions to open branch campuses. The CAA in the UAE had decided to fast-track accreditation of both UK and UAE providers that had a recently published QAA report, which was seen as a helpful development.
13. Ms Rigby welcomed QAA's engagement with the Department for Education and the value that QAA could offer in helping universities demonstrate the actions being taken by institutions to ensure academic standards were secure across the sector.

Draft mid-term response to our 2018 ENQA Review (item 5, BD-2020-78)

5. The Chair welcomed Ms Pelik to the meeting and noted that this would be her last meeting of the QAA Board before she left her role as Director of Strategic Projects. The Chair thanked Ms Pelik for all of the work she had done for and on behalf of QAA.
6. Ms Pelik provided the Board with a draft of the follow-up report that QAA was required to submit to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) by mid-May for consideration at the June 2020 meeting of ENQA Board. She reported that there were two areas to be completed; the outcomes of QAA's Governance Review and the consideration of the future of TNE.
7. The Board noted that QAA was subject to external review by ENQA every five years in order to maintain its status as full member of the Association and in order to apply for continued listing on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

8. Ms Pelik reported that QAA had undergone a review by ENQA in February 2018. The review resulted in an outcome of full compliance against each of 13 standards and substantially compliant against one standard. One recommendation was made, 13 commendations and 17 suggestions for further development. This was a very positive and successful outcome, leading to confirmation of QAA as a full member of ENQA and its continued listing on the EQAR.
18. The Board noted that in its letter confirming the outcome, the ENQA Board emphasised two particular areas for action: the inclusion of students in all review methods aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), and for QAA to intensify overseas TNE reviews to protect students' interests and to safeguard the reputation of UK provision overseas. More broadly, it encouraged QAA to widen the involvement of international experts, employers and professional practitioners in its procedures.
19. The Board advised that the international expertise of Board members should be stressed further. It was otherwise content with how these matters were addressed in the draft.
20. The Board **agreed** the draft report and **delegated** to the EDO and Deputy CEO, the updating of the outcome with respect to anything relevant arising from the Governance review and regarding TNE following the consideration by this Board, GuildHE Council and UUK Board.
21. Mr Blackstock reported that QAA was required to provide a Substantive Change report to the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) which would come to the June meeting of the Board. He reported that the UK Government would shortly take on the chair of the Bologna Process; extensive discussions had taken place in ENQA on reform of the European Standards and Guidelines and he had worked informally with colleagues on a document that would be published shortly. The Board note that World Bank grants would be made available to Africa.

Proposals arising from the joint consultation on TNE (item 6, BD-2020-79)

22. Ms Pelik reported on the outcome of the consultation on the future approach to the quality of the UK's TNE activity. The main themes, areas of broad consensus and divergences in certain questions were summarised.
23. The Board noted that the report of the consultation and recommendations would also be presented to GuildHE Executive on 12 March and to the UUK Board on 24 April, and that all three boards must agree on the course of action. Ms Pelik asked the Board to provide their views for onward transmission to GuildHE and UUK. The Board also noted the recommendations for next steps, and Ms Pelik asked the Board to provide guidance on a number of issues for development.
24. The Board was reminded that the UK was the largest provider of transnational education in the world and the recommendations were about developing an internationally credible approach to maintain confidence in UK TNE provision.
25. Ms Pelik reported that for Model 1: Reaffirming Institutional and National Enhancement arrangements, responses were balanced but also showed that there was some confusion about what current arrangements were included in this model.

26. Ms Pelik reported that there was clear support for Model 2: Regular in-country quality enhancement. She added that data-based approaches and in-country reviews were not opposed, with reviews depending on sound information. There was the potential to build work on the local data landscape and the views of students into any future approach to offer a strong new approach to QAA's in-country work.
27. Mr Johnson noted that throughout the report, the term 'enhancement' was used rather than 'assurance'. Mr Blackstock responded that the OfS saw assurance as its role. Ms Pelik added that the in-country review activity was largely about enhancement, but that it did provide assurance, if not at a regulatory level.
28. The Board discussed the recommendations set out in the report and noted recommendation C:
  - That a UUK-led task group is formed to examine what measures would be necessary to move towards a risk-based, metrics-informed system of quality assurance for TNE in England.

It was noted that this recommendation appeared to apply to English quality assurance, while there was concern that institutions may be subject to an additional burden from OfS.

29. Ms Pelik stressed that the single strongest message from the consultation was the support for a UK-wide solution and reported that there had been strong support in the consultation for the 11 guiding principles set out in appendix 1. There was 60% support for Model 2; support was around 50/50 for Model 1. Following discussion about 'brand UK', the Chair stressed that QAA could offer support for the sector and for enhancement. He said that the sector could show that it was going beyond what was expected by a regulator in demonstrating the importance of protecting the reputation for quality of UK TNE in the eyes of international stakeholders.
30. The Board discussed the questions set out in the report and agreed the following:

#### Questions

- a. Does the Board endorse the report of the consultation findings?  
The Board welcomed the report and noted the endorsement of the 11 guiding principles.
- b. Does the Board approve the recommendation in paragraph 14?  
The Board agreed that the recommendations were specific suggestions and indicated the agency's willingness to deliver; these were agreed as a way forward.
- c. Does the Board approve a suggested five-year programme of in-country review to be run by the QAA incorporating:
  - clear package of additional activity beyond International Insight
  - review in up to three countries a year, selecting one country from each of three categories outlined
  - taking a responsive and risk-based approach to activity and review in each country
  - for the programme to run for the five years from 2020-21 to 2024-25?

The Board agreed that QAA would be happy to provide a service in this way if this were to be agreed as the preferred option. The Board noted that the agency was trying to serve two purposes - to establish confidence in the UK for delivery in other countries and delivery of reviews for individual providers.

- d. Does the Board support the principle that all providers should pay, regardless of activity, in effect strongly encouraging English providers to make use of this additional QAA offering?
  - e. Does the Board support a differential fee model based on TNE student numbers and number of TNE arrangements per country?  
The Board recognised the sector-wide benefits; however, the small number of institutions with no international work would not wish to pay for this additional offering. The Board considered this was a matter for the sector to decide.
  - f. Does the Board support QAA delivering the programme with external oversight offered by UKSCQA?  
The Board was cognisant of the value of UKSCQA in supporting the UK perspective.
31. Mr Mahoney asked what would happen if UUK and GuildHE did not endorse the proposals. Mr Blackstock reported that it was then likely that this approach would not proceed, and conversations would take place with HEFCW and the Scottish Funding Council about how to move forward. Mr Bols reported that if the proposals were accepted, QAA would have five years to evidence the impact for institutions and to provide what institutions would value and find useful.

#### Quarter 2 Monitoring and Performance Report on Annual Plan and Finances (item 7, BD-2020-80)

32. Ms Blackburn provided a summary of the Q2 performance against both the Annual Plan and the Budget. The Board noted that the report covered the RAG rating of Annual Plan priorities and the summary of the financial position for the six months ended 31 January 2020.
33. Ms Blackburn reported that the 2019-20 Annual Plan and Budget were developed 12-18 months in advance of delivery and were therefore at risk of not reflecting the latest position. As a result of the significant changes in the operating environment in England, with an increased level of uncertainty and volatility, monitoring and reporting of the Annual Plan and finances to the Board took place on a quarterly basis. This, combined with the monthly reports reviewed by the Executive, allowed QAA's Executive and Board to assess current progress towards strategic aims and delivery of the budget on a timely basis. It drove reflection on the factors that had influenced this progress, identifying any action needed to bring results back on track; and provided the opportunity to look ahead and assess the upcoming challenges.
34. Ms Stott updated the Board on the current position with regard to the QAA KPIs. She provided a high-level update on the annual objectives agreed for the organisation for 2019-20. The Board noted that these objectives were agreed as part of TCC, and now that QAA was at full complement of resource under the new structure, the targets and measures of success for the new teams were being reviewed.
35. Ms Stott reported that the KPIs had been updated and there were two in her area which were in progress but at risk or delayed. The Board noted that DQB was at risk, however, the rewrite project was now proceeding well. The satisfaction survey was

delayed but in hand; the survey was being designed to be rolled out to the existing pool of customers, to create a baseline for future years.

36. Ms Blackburn assured the Board that overall, the agency was in a good position. There was no material difference to the plan to report and staff development had been factored in as the new structure bedded in. Ms Duncan noted that the membership position looked positive but noted that the team was under development.

Appointments and retirements to Board and Board Committees (item 8, BD-2020-81)

37. The Chair reported that this paper confirmed the appointments to the Board and Committees and sought interest from Board members in relation to the Audit and Risk Committee vacancy.
38. The Board noted that the Nominations and Remuneration Committee received a paper at its meeting on 2 March and had made the recommendations indicated in this paper for Board approval. The Board noted the appointments and retirements to the Board and its Committees.
39. The Board noted that the following appointment to the Board would be considered after the outcome of discussions of the Governance Review report at this meeting:
- 1 person to be appointed by DfE (NI), HEFCW and SFC jointly for an initial three-year term from 2 October 2020.

The Board considered and approved the following appointments:

- Linda Duncan for a second and final three-year term from 14 March 2020 to 14 March 2023 as Board Member and Vice-Chair of the QAA Board
  - Philip Wilson for a second and final three-year term from 21 June 2020 to 21 June 2023 as a Board Member.
40. The Board noted that, in anticipation of the retirement of Matt Adie, the Governance team had begun the process of recruiting to the position of Independent Director who met the criteria for student representation, for an initial one-year term from 20 June 2020. It was likely that the Board would be asked to approve this appointment outside of a formal committee meeting, and the outcome would be reported to the June meeting of the Board.
41. The Board considered and approved the following Committee appointments:
- a. to the Access, Recognition and Licensing Committee
    - Professor Denise McAlister for a second and final term until the end of her term as a Board member on 2 October 2020
  - b. to the Nominations and Remuneration Committee
    - Linda Duncan for a second and final term until the end of her term as a Board member on 14 March 2023
  - c. to the QAA Scotland Strategic Advisory Committee
    - Ms Anne Ashton as a senior representative of the Scottish Government for a second and final three-year term to September 2023
  - d. to the QAA Wales Strategic Advisory Committee
    - Nicola Poole as a representative of the Wales Quality Network for an initial

three-year term to January 2023.

42. The Chair reported that Andrew Wathey had indicated that due to other conflicting commitments he would like to step down as a member of the Audit and Risk Committee and a new member was being sought. Board members were asked to contact the Governance team if interested in supporting the Committee. Mr Watkins (Chair of ARC) commented that he would like to secure interest from the sector as the Committee was predominately made up of independent members.
43. The Board noted that a further vacancy would arise from 21 June 2020 when Matt Adie retired from the Board and therefore would automatically also retire from ARC. Mr Watkins had asked that the Independent Director outlined in minute 41 above be approached once appointed. Both appointments would need to be agreed outside of the formal Committee process and would be reported to the June meeting of the Board.
44. The Board noted that the NRC had previously made the decision not to move forward with appointing to the vacant role on the Designated Quality Body Committee at this time. They had agreed to wait for the recommendations from the governance review.

#### Board Committees Summary Report (item 9, BD-2020-82)

45. The Board received and noted the summary reports of recent meetings of the Board Committees. The Chair welcomed the more concise summaries and noted that Board members had access to all Committee papers on the Board Committee Site.

#### Strategy development - Board update (item 9b, BD-2020-93)

9. Ms Stott reported that the Quality Assurance Agency was the independent quality body for UK higher education and was internationally recognised for its expertise in quality assurance. The agency was trusted by higher education providers and regulatory bodies to maintain and enhance quality and standards. QAA also provided expert services to UK higher education members, in order that they could give their students the best possible experience. QAA works with governments, agencies and institutions globally to benefit UK higher education and its international reputation.
10. The purpose of QAA is to safeguard academic standards and ensure the quality and global reputation of UK higher education. This is achieved by working with higher education providers, regulatory bodies and student bodies with the shared objective of supporting students to succeed.
11. The report updated the Board on the changing context within which the organisation was working and the Board noted that the strategic priorities would guide QAA until 2025:
  - the trusted expert independent body supporting the enhancement and regulation of higher education across a diverse UK
  - providing expert advice that secures standards and supports quality
  - strengthening the global reputation of UK higher education enhancement.
49. Mr Blackstock reported that there had been engagement with colleagues and the plan was now much more detailed. It was anticipated that Hanover would make the plan more 'real' for staff and stakeholders and that they would offer support for the funding bodies and the sector. Ms Stott reported that Hanover would also be asked to embed the strategic aims and develop KPIs; these would be brought to the Board in the near



future. The Chair commented that the KPIs would be critical in allowing the Board to judge how QAA had performed against the Delivery Plan.

50. Mr Johnson agreed that QAA are leaders in quality. He noted that the report talked about supporting and enhancement and he said that he would like QAA to take a leadership stance. The Chair said that QAA could not be self-appointed leaders and the use of 'support' indicated that point. Ms Stott added that work around enhancement came from the institutions, they must be seen to take the lead. Mr Blackstock reported that QAA had become more humble and its work must be about the institutions; he added that QAA only existed because 98% of the institutions had endorsed the agency during the consultation.

#### Any other business

51. The Chair reminded the Board Members that the QAA Annual Conference would take place on 22 and 23 April. He asked anyone willing to Chair an event to contact the Governance team. Board members were also reminded to contact the Governance team with any requests for accommodation.