



Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Meeting of the Board of Directors

Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 13:30 – 17:30

Minutes of the meeting on 13 October 2021

Present

Board Members:

Professor Simon Gaskell (Chair)
Ms Eve Alcock
Dr Vanessa Davies
Ms Hillary Gyebi-Ababio
Professor Nic Beech
Professor Maria Hinfelaar
Professor Craig Mahoney
Professor Sue Rigby
Professor John Sawkins
Professor Oliver Turnbull
Professor Philip Wilson

In attendance

Officers:

Mr Douglas Blackstock (Chief Executive)
Mr Alastair Delaney (Executive Director of Operations (Deputy CEO))
Ms Vicki Stott (Chief Executive designate)
Ms Ailsa Crum (Director of Membership, Quality Enhancement & Standards) (Item 15)
Mr Tom Yates (Director of Corporate Affairs)

In attendance via Zoom:

Board Members:

Ms Angela Joyce
Ms Sara Drake
Professor David Jones

Officers:

Ms Caroline Blackburn (Finance Director)
Ms Kate Montgomery (Governance Support Officer)

Guests:

Professor Peter Coaldrake (AO Chief Commissioner, TEQSA) (Item 3)
Professor Richard Williams (Principal, Heriot-Watt University) (Item 16)

Welcome, apologies and Chair's opening remarks (item 1)

1. The Chair welcomed members to the meeting.
2. There were apologies from Linda Duncan and Craig Watkins. Angela Joyce and Vanessa Davies would miss part of the meeting.
3. It was noted with regret that Oliver Johnson had had to retire for health reasons. The Chair said he would write expressing Board members' best wishes.

Quorum and Interests (item 2)

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

Guest presentation**Presentation from Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), Australia: Professor Peter Coaldrake AO, Chief Commissioner (item 3)**

5. The Chair welcomed Professor Peter Coaldrake to the meeting and thanked him for joining despite the late hour in Australia.
6. PC expressed his appreciation of the good cooperation and relationship between TEQSA and QAA; the most recent cooperation related to industrial-scale academic cheating.
7. PC gave a presentation which set out TEQSA's role and areas of focus. TEQSA performs similar functions to QAA, with a larger regulatory role; it is about nine years old. Australia has 44 universities (which tend to be large) and 143 other providers (mostly institutes of higher education). TEQSA has shifted its regulatory approach to support the sector during the Covid pandemic, and has been praised for the flexibility it has shown. The pandemic means that universities will think about new offerings, which will bring unfamiliar challenges to TEQSA.
8. Thematic issues include: cost recovery, foreign "interference", academic integrity, English language studies, admission standards, cyber security, third-party offshore delivery, micro-credits. Issues likely to be shared with other agencies including QAA included the acceleration of online and hybrid delivery of teaching and learning, student expectations and the "sticker price", and elevated risks with increasing internationalisation.
9. The Chair noted that much of what PC had described resonated with the experience in the UK. SG queried to what extent TEQSA dealt with different approaches in different states or whether the situation is homogeneous. PC replied that the previous decentralised approach had ended, which made sense given Australia's geographic remoteness; states no longer had higher education functions and it was a responsibility of the federal government.
10. SG asked about online and hybrid delivery, where terminology was often imprecise. PC agreed: institutions had made bold claims about their transitions, but student feedback had been revealing. Some regional universities had longer experience in this area, and student satisfaction was accordingly greater, and TEQSA was keen to share examples of good practice – but the methodology was not sophisticated.

11. Sue Rigby followed up on the point about micro-credentials, and mentioned the work she had led on QAA's behalf leading a subgroup looking at the Credit Framework for England. Given governments' focus on relatively large units, there was likely to be a grey area with scope for self-regulation, perhaps with a voluntary code – and there might be scope for developing that code internationally. PC agreed that there was fertile ground here for collaboration.
12. The Chair asked about student involvement at TEQSA; PC confirmed that there was a student advisory body, and that students were included in the annual conference, but there was much more to do, and QAA was likely some way ahead in this area.
13. In thanking PC for a very useful conversation, SG suggested that a few topics for discussion and contact details be shared – TY to action.

Minutes of the Board meeting held on 16th June 2021, actions and matters arising (item 4, BD-21/22-01)

15. Before paragraph 40, the word 'Diploma' should be added to the heading 'Grading of Access to Higher Education'.
16. In paragraph 80, the wording relating to alternative providers' eligibility to go on the OfS register needed clarifying.
17. The Board **approved** the minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2021, subject to those amendments.
18. In relation to Action 39, SG confirmed that he had spoken to Andrew Wathey, who had made some complimentary comments, and who would be a continuing advocate for QAA.
19. All other actions from the previous meeting were noted as complete, and the Board noted the updates provided.

Consultative Board Update (item 5)

Meeting held on 20 September 2021

20. Maria Hinfelaar had chaired the Consultative Board meeting in SG's absence, and reflected on the meeting, which had been well attended. Alongside the usual updates, the agenda had focused on the OfS consultation on quality and standards, which was then still ongoing; Gareth Crossman had run through the main points. OfS had commented that it was talking to sector bodies and its sister regulators, and was open to liaising with PSRBs. OfS appeared to have accepted the importance of the UK brand. There had been some discussion around the potential for a continuing role for the Quality Code, above the baseline where OfS attention would be focused.
21. Sue Rigby added that she had recently attended a meeting on Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) design, at which there had been no reference to quality assurance; the assumption seemed to be that QAA would be sent in when there was a problem. Vicki Stott expressed surprise at this, and commented that QAA had been kept out of the loop with respect to the TEF. It was confirmed that there would be a written record of the Consultative Board meeting.

Chief Executive's Report (item 6, BD-21/22-02)

22. The Chair noted that this would be Douglas Blackstock's last report as Chief Executive; it marked a moment of transition.
23. DB thanked John Sawkins for hosting the Board meeting and away-day, and reflected that it had been 19 years since he first attended a QAA Board meeting, which had also been in Scotland.
24. DB reflected on the last quarter, which ended a year that had started with uncertainty over the sector's financial position and therefore about QAA membership; in the event only two universities in England were now outside membership, and the college network had paid dividends in holding onto college members; there were still only a small number of alternative providers in membership.
25. DB welcomed the news that the DfE had committed to legislating to outlaw the advertisement of essay mills – QAA's campaign had been a concerted effort with Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE and the NUS. QAA's work on academic integrity would not end with the Bill.
26. Engagement with the OfS was constructive, though challenges remained, and QAA now had sight of the new specification. Relationships with the Scottish Funding Council were very strong, and the shift back to grant funding in Wales was important.
27. QAA was active in building relationships internationally on behalf of UK higher education. At the recent UUK international conference, OfS had presented plans on transnational education, and the sector had made clear that QAA was the only body it wanted involved. However, international competitors were visible at many events, and QAA needed "boots on the ground".
28. Finally, amid the furore over GCSE and A-level results, there had been almost no complaints or appeals relating to the Access to HE Diploma, which QAA administered with a team of only a couple of people.
29. SG agreed that there was much to be proud of in the year to date. With relation to the Access to HE Diploma, the good result had been achieved after some difficult moments, and he thanked Angela Joyce for her efforts.
30. SG noted that paragraph two of DB's report might imply that a new director of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had already been appointed; this was not yet the case.
31. SG welcomed the creation of a student network; he asked whether the right mechanisms were in place for institutional leaders to understand how much benefit they got from QAA. VS commented that the membership team had worked hard to extend lines of communication into providers, and that DB had written to heads of institutions; meanwhile, VS was arranging introductory meetings with vice-chancellors. SG suggested a written summary of how institutions benefitted.
32. David Jones confirmed that in Northern Ireland news was still awaited from the Department for the Economy on the type of quality model planned, but the expectation was still of an enhancement-based model.
33. Maria Hinfelaar noted in respect of essay mills that the question of territorial reach was sensitive. VS agreed that UK-wide legislation was desirable; DfE officials appeared to support this too, but that the political announcement, while welcome, had been sudden.

DB added that devolved administrations did want to be included but consent across the political spectrum was needed.

Report of policy developments and interactions with funders and regulators in the UK nations (item 7, BD-21/22-03)

34. SG congratulated Alastair Delaney on his appointment as Executive Director of Operations and Deputy CEO.
35. SG also noted that England seemed to be absent from this report; AD replied that there was much discussion on England elsewhere in the agenda, and in the away day to follow; on this occasion balance had seemed better served by focusing this report on the other nations, but this would not be typical.
36. AD commented that the picture in Scotland was fast-moving. The QAA Scotland Committee had met the previous day. One member of QAA staff was now seconded 80% to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which was testament to QAA's reputation and a signal of the policy direction in Scotland. SFC also had a secondee from the University of Edinburgh. With respect to the outcome agreement, QAA was working to ensure it understood the college sector, with SFC's support.
37. In Wales, QAA had held a joint workshop on quality with the Welsh Government, Estyn and HEFCW. Estyn's role was defined in statute, so it was QAA's role which was open to definition.
38. In Northern Ireland, QAA would be holding its first conference, for which sign-up was encouraging, and was finalising the specification which the Department for the Economy had commissioned. Encouragement from the sector to ensure that a conclusion was reached would be welcome.
39. SG commented that AD was clearly personally highly regarded in Scotland; along with that came some concern about his change of role. It was important to assure the regulator and government in Scotland that AD's continuing interest would offset any sense of loss.
40. John Sawkins praised AD's work in Scotland; the secondment to SFC reduced risk for the entire sector; the level of expertise had now been raised, and the sector as a whole welcomed the work being done.
41. Oliver Turnbull added that he had been at a meeting that morning between the three nations, where alignment had been apparent. AD confirmed that QAA had arranged that meeting, which had been a good opportunity to bring the networks together to talk about common issues; it showed QAA's reach.

QAA Strategic Risk Register Review (item 8, BD-21/22-04)

42. Tom Yates presented the strategic risk register, and reminded the Board that it was reviewed monthly by the Senior Leadership Team. Some risks had been downgraded as a result of successful mitigations; the two top risks (around the EQAR register and ENQA review, and around OfS's regulatory approach) were now in rather stark relief as a result.
43. The Board asked about risk 7 (alignment to Westminster government), where the mitigations might be expanded; risk 6 (membership in England), which might potentially be further downgraded, and where there was sensitivity about the language referring to different nations in the UK; and risk 3 (cyber attack), where Caroline Blackburn and

others gave assurance that QAA was working with Jisc to reduce the risk in every way possible, but given the experience in the wider sector, especially with ransomware, it had to remain rated as significant.

44. There was more extensive discussion of risk 1, relating to EQAR and ENQA. AD explained that ENQA was likely to understand the context in its review in 2023, whereas EQAR tended to take a more binary approach. The possibility of a targeted ENQA review carried risks, because it might overemphasise areas that had changed (in England) to the exclusion of good practice elsewhere (in Scotland and Wales, for example); the key would be how to present developments in England.
45. The Board **approved** the risk register, subject to the changes discussed.

Year End Monitoring and Performance Report (item 9, BD-21/22-05)

46. Alastair Delaney presented the report. He noted that the performance of the DQB function was judged according to two aspects: first, whether QAA was delivering against the specification, where performance was broadly considered good; second, the Office for Students (OfS)'s confidence in QAA delivering the function overall, which was where concerns had been expressed about a potential conflict of interest. This would be discussed further in the away day.
47. In Membership, performance was strong, with good take-up and an uptick in subscriptions to the Quality Insights package.
48. In International & Professional Services, demand was high – a success story which led to a need to invest in further resource to ensure that the team had the capacity to deliver its work.
49. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it had become clear that preparation for the ENQA review needed more resource, so another member of staff was being added to support what was a very important project for the Agency.
50. The Chair queried whether the EQAR issue was rated green because it was some way in the future; AD clarified that green rating reflected the fact that the project was on track in delivery terms; the rating did not equate to the assessment of the risk.
51. Nic Beech noted the impressive list of international activity, and wondered how QAA assessed the ethics of doing business in different countries; VS responded that this was a topic on the away day agenda.
52. Caroline Blackburn summarised the financial position, confirming that the year had ended strongly, with revenue below budget but an operating surplus of £131k against a budgeted deficit. Much of the variance had come from reductions in support costs, travel costs, and office costs through non-use. Shortfalls in international revenue had been partly offset by savings on travel; in Membership the revenue was above budget.
53. Investments had improved significantly this year, after a poor performance the previous year. A small increase in the USS pension deficit was noted. The final table depicted free reserves of 3.4m, a modest increase on the previous year.
54. SG agreed the financial position was a strong one in a year where conditions had been difficult and resulted in reduced revenue; he congratulated CB and her team for the careful husbandry this showed. It was important to keep an eye on reserves; more information about the rationale behind the free reserves would be helpful.

55. Linda Duncan commented as Honorary Treasurer that she worked closely with CB and had scrutinised the figures. She thoroughly endorsed the report.
56. Board members enquired as to whether a return to travel might cause a financial problem; CB replied that the current budget did allow for a return to travel.
57. SG noted the wider point of significant savings having been made, raising the question as to whether they could be sustained longer-term. CB and DB commented to the effect that while some savings (e.g. on travel) were not likely to be sustained, and uncertainty and volatility were likely to continue, some savings would be maintained, and there would be an opportunity in 2023 to reduce the significant cost of premises, when the lease on Southgate House in Gloucester came to an end.
58. SG thanked CB for her efforts.

Report on Financial Matters (item 10, BD-21/22-06)

59. CB presented the report. Investments had recovered strongly and were now at a pre-pandemic level; the investment managers had performed in line with similar funds and ahead of the benchmark.
60. Reform of the USS pension scheme was proceeding, but with a smaller increase in contributions than previously projected. There would be a lower salary threshold for the cut-off for the defined benefit scheme, whose accrual rate would reduce; contributions for the DC scheme would remain at 20%; the deficit recovery forecast was increased from 10 years to 18 years; QAA's liability would grow by £2.1m, which was now factored into reserves.
61. The Board noted the update.

Policy Review (item 11, BD-21/22-07)

Complaints procedure

62. TY presented the complaints procedure. The only change related to vexatious complainants. The number of formal complaints received remained very low.
63. SD asked whether there was scope for complaints of substance as well as process, in the event of an appeal or representation; TY confirmed that appeals follow a prescribed formula which can relate to the substance of a review outcome, or to procedure; complaints can in theory cover anything.
64. The Board **approved** the complaints procedure.

Appointments and Retirements to Board and Board Committees (item 12, BD-21/22-08)

SG left the meeting

65. VD chaired in the absence of SG. VD stated that SG had indicated that he was willing to serve a second term as Chair of the Board, and that it had been strongly recommended that he be re-appointed as Board member and Chair.
66. The Board **approved** the reappointment, and asked that their enthusiasm and unanimity in doing so be noted.

SG returned to the meeting

67. VD reported that the Board had unanimously approved SG's reappointment as Chair; SG replied that he was delighted to continue in the role.
68. The Board noted the appointments and retirements set out in the paper, and **approved** the following appointments:
- a. to the Advisory Committee for Degree Awarding Powers (ACDAP)
 - Nina Cupric, Vice President (Education), University of Derby Union of Students, to serve a 1-year term starting from 9 November 2021 (which can potentially be extended by a further year), following a recruitment campaign.
 - b. to the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)
 - Craig Watkins, for a second and final term of office, from 13 December 2021 to 12 December 2023 (the end of his tenure on the QAA Board)
 - c. to the Nominations and Remuneration Committee (NRC)
 - Professor Maria Hinfelaar, for a second and final term of office, from 10 October 2021 to 1 September 2022 (the end of her tenure on the QAA Board)
 - d. to the Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SSAC) the following nominees:

Name	Institution	Role
Ramy Badrie	University of Brighton	Student
Alice Ruby Foulis	The University of Law	Graduate
Harry Michael Williams	Keele University	Graduate (ACDAP student representative)
Amy Elizabeth Gallacher	University of St Andrews	Sabbatical Officer
Ondrej Kucerak	University of Aberdeen	Sabbatical Officer
Sean Righardt Holm	Swansea University	Student
Christopher Brasnett	University of Bristol	Graduate
James Edward McHale	University of Leeds	Student
Emma Murphy	Queen's University Belfast	Sabbatical Officer
Jamie Thomas Crawford	Blackpool & The Fylde College	Sabbatical Officer
Nina Curpric	University of Derby	ACDAP student representative

Committee Reporting (item 13, BD-21/22-091)

69. The Board noted the written reports from the Committees.

QAA Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SSAC)

70. Eve Alcock commented that she hoped SSAC would continue the initiative of linking its work to Board business. Hillary Gyebi-Ababio added that she was keen for SSAC to do further work on essay mills following the Government announcement, which she welcomed.

Designated Quality Body (DQB) Committee

71. SG reported from the meeting on 5 October 2021. The Committee had considered the possibility of co-opting members, but had recognised that this was now overtaken by Board discussions about the governance of the DQB function.

Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC)

72. SG reported a quoracy issue at the last meeting. TY was not aware of any particular reason why the issue should arise again.

Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers (ACDAP)

73. No comments were made.

Nomination and Remuneration Committee (NRC)

74. The Committee had made the recommendation for executive directors' remuneration; the Board would be asked to approve this at the away day.

Note: the detail of the recommendation and the Board's approval are noted for the record in a separate paper in the December Board pack, BD-21/22-29.

QAA Scotland Advisory Committee (QAAS)

75. John Sawkins gave an oral report on the meeting which had been held the previous day. It had been well timed as the Quality Arrangements for Scottish Higher Education (QASHE) Group had just met, so QAAS had been able to receive views from that group and refine them. Two main items had been considered: the impact of OfS's proposals to move away from the Quality Code, and the Scottish Funding Council's review and anticipated new review method.
76. On the former, QAAS had noted the sector and stakeholders were sorry to see the loosening of the commitment to the UK Quality Code, and reaffirmed its value to the devolved nations.
77. On the latter, the review was ongoing; Alastair Delaney had been very well placed in discussions, and his experience with Education Scotland was very valuable. The expectation was of a recommendation for a combined tertiary quality framework, bringing together higher education and further education. This might present challenges around bringing the different cultures together, but was welcome.
78. SG wondered whether an endorsement of the Quality Code by the sector in England, even if the regulator abandoned it, might reassure the sector in Scotland; JS responded that he couldn't speak for the sector as a whole but that he thought it would be helpful. Craig Mahoney said he could not speak for Scottish vice-chancellors either, but that there was certainly frustration at the destabilising effect of the OfS proposals, which showed little sign of any UK perspective. He added that QAA Scotland was well thought of, and had unanimous commitment from Scottish universities.

Calling of the AGM (item 14, BD-21/22-10)

79. The Board **approved** the notice of the Annual General Meeting.

Ailsa Crum joined the meeting

Discussions of current issues (item 15)"What is quality?" Presentation by Ailsa Crum, QAA

79. AC gave a presentation offering a historical perspective of what constitutes 'quality' and looking specifically at how QAA's approach to academic quality and standards had

evolved over time. The presentation explored how the approach to quality differed in the four nations of the UK, the greater influence of students in determining what quality is in higher education, and the impact of the Covid pandemic on the approach to quality.

80. SG thanked AC for a historical perspective of quality in preparation for tomorrow's discussions. He noted that QAA should be cautious around sector-recognised standards, where there was a danger of the sector being seen to be "marking its own homework". He also suggested that QAA should be seen to be forward-looking.
81. Maria Hinfelaar commented that while there might be an over-emphasis on degree outcomes, they were nonetheless a valid and important measure.
82. Nic Beech welcomed the idea of learning communities, which research suggested were effective. Hillary Gyebi-Ababio reflected that although quality was in danger of being politicised, QAA had a strong record in caring about quality in a principled way, and could play a role in tackling false dichotomies (staff vs students, assurance vs enhancement).
83. SG concluded that in looking beyond the pandemic, which had accelerated developments, it was important to focus on quality and standards themselves, and then consider what QAA could do to serve them and the sector, rather than on QAA itself.

Professor Richard Williams, Principal, Heriot-Watt University, joined the meeting.

Welcome to Heriot-Watt University from Professor Richard Williams (item 16)

84. Richard Williams warmly welcomed the Board to Heriot-Watt university and to Scotland. He had found QAA a critical partner in the development of Transnational Education (TNE), and RW was especially proud to welcome the Board in this week when Heriot-Watt was celebrating its bicentenary.
85. RW rehearsed some of the history of Heriot-Watt, and sketched out its current structure, with around 30,000 students, 52% of whom were postgraduates, operating from five campuses in Scotland, Dubai and Malaysia. Its revenue was around £240m per year, £65m of which was accounted for by research. It was unconventional in structure and organisation, with no branch campus model, being instead an integrated multinational university with a single degree certification system.
86. RW noted that QAA had brought Heriot-Watt quality and reputation: QAA's international reputation was strong and an asset to the brand of UK higher education. QAA's influence was much needed as Heriot-Watt and the wider sector develop relationships in the Middle East and Asia.

Chair's closing remarks (item 17b)

87. SG thanked RW for his welcome and his comments regarding the relationship with QAA. He looked forward to the dinner this evening, which other leaders of higher education in Scotland would join, and to the following day's away day.

Date of next meeting (item 18)

88. The Chair confirmed that the next Board meeting would take place on Wednesday 15 December – to include the AGM. The meeting was closed at **17.30**.

Board of Directors Action List				
Minute:	Action:	Owner:	Due Date:	Update:
13/10/21 13.	TY to liaise with TEQSA regarding topics and contact details	TY	December 2021	QAA and TEQSA are in regular contact, but TY has emailed specifically to follow up to the discussion in October. Opportunities for further Board-level engagement may follow.
54.	Provide further information on the rationale behind the free reserves	CB	March 2022	The rationale is explained in the Annual Report and Financial Statements (within the Financial Review, paragraphs 73-79).