Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Meeting of the Board of Directors

22 October 2025, at the University of Salford

Present

Board Members

Christian Brodie (Chair)
Jimena Alamo
Nic Beech
Nicky Callow
Caroline Carter
Fazal Dad
Phil Deans
Alex Fraser
Rachid Hourizi
Lucy Jones
Richard Kaldhi
Karl Leydecker
Mirjam Plantinga
Dani Saghafi
John Sawkins
Alex Stanley
Peter Vermeulen

Officers

Vicki Stott (Chief Executive)
Tom Yates (Executive Director of Corporate Affairs)
Caroline Blackburn (Chief Operating and Finance Officer)
Rob Stroud (Executive Director of Quality Assurance and Enhancement)
Nick Bayley (Executive Director of Business Development and Engagement)
Rachel Hill-Kelly (Assistant Company Secretary)

Welcome, apologies and Chair's opening remarks

1. Christian Brodie welcomed members to the meeting and thanked Nic Beech for hosting. Apologies had been received from Odette Hutchinson and Moira Fischbacher-Smith.

Quorum and Interests (Item 2)

2. The meeting was declared quorate. No further declarations of interest had been received.

Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 June 2025 and Matters Arising from the Minutes (Item 3, BD-25-26-01)

3. All actions were complete, and other matters arising were addressed elsewhere in the papers.

4. The minutes were **approved** as an accurate record.

Chief Executive's report and report of policy developments and interactions with funders and regulators in the UK nations (Item 4 BD-25-26-02)

5. Vicki Stott presented the report and highlighted ongoing challenges in completing the transformation project due to staff's limited capacity to maintain business as usual while also taking forward longer-term change.

6. The recently published white paper for post-16 education and skills was much as anticipated given QAA's discussions with the Department for Education. The proposed reintroduction of maintenance grants was welcomed. The report also indicated a clear legislative intent to introduce index-linking of tuition fees to inflation. Additionally, an international student levy of 6% was proposed. The white paper indicated a reinforcement of the position of the regulator in England.

7. On quality matters the white paper suggested a mechanism would be introduced to link fees to quality, with the opportunity to charge higher fees only if a provider was judged to be excellent at institutional level, likely through Gold or Silver ratings in the revised Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

8. QAA in its public response expressed concern that institutions aiming to improve quality may lack the financial capacity to do so if fees were effectively capped. The TEF continued to rely on data that was approximately 18 months old, potentially penalising providers for issues that may have already been resolved. The proposal to cap student numbers in areas where quality was judged to be poor was a more rational approach, although this too would be based on outdated data. There was no indication whether Scotland or Wales would implement a corresponding fee uplift for English students studying in those nations.

9. Alex Stanley noted that one of the unintended consequences of the white paper proposals was a challenging position for student representatives around the National Student Survey (NSS) and TEF, as supporting their university with a high-quality submission could now mean higher fees for students. [redacted].

10. The importance of standards was acknowledged in the white paper. [redacted].

11. [redacted].

12. [redacted].

13. [redacted].

14. The London Business School had done detailed modelling on the impact of the international student levy on demand and price sensitivity and concluded that the UK sector could not attract enough students to compensate for the levy.

15. VS noted that the meeting coincided with the final day of Douglas Blackstock's term as President of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). VS had conveyed QAA's best wishes to him.

16. RS provided reflections on relationships within Europe, highlighting the value that DB's continued association had brought to QAA, particularly as the Agency's internal focus remained on ESG alignment. QAA's new European strategy would aim to continue capitalising on opportunities and maintaining QAA's reputation as a well-respected agency.

17. The mid-cycle report to ENQA had been positively received. The ENQA Board had expressed its thanks to QAA for its comprehensive update, on the substantial changes and developments in its external quality assurance activities since the last review. In particular, the ENQA Board had commended QAA's intensive efforts in strategic repositioning, structural reform, methodological innovation, its continued commitment to ESG compliance, and the strengthening of stakeholder engagement.

18. QAA's revised annual planning process had begun to yield positive outcomes, with teams focused on delivery goals, although some areas required further refinement. The Head of Wales and Northern Ireland vacancy was an opportunity to reimagine the operational approach in those nations.

19. The first External Quality Review (EQR) had successfully completed, resulting in positive quality assurance outcomes for the participating university, Arts University Bournemouth (AUB). [redacted].

20. TY gave an update on public affairs work [redacted] and the development of the next iteration of QAA's transational education scheme, as the current programme would end in 2026.

Year End Monitoring and Performance Report on Annual Plan and Finances (Item 6, BD-25-26-04)

21. Rob Stroud presented the year-end position in the previous annual plan, reminding the Board that the plan had been redrawn during the year following the restructure. The paper reported by exception, and therefore reflected areas where work had been delayed, but overall the Agency had delivered well against the plan, including the first fully year of delivery against the NMC contract, the first tranche Quality Code advice and guidance, and the first full year of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) in Scotland.

22. One significant exception related to student engagement, which had featured on the annual plan for several years. QAA had not yet finalised its approach and was in the process of developing it further; QAA's Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SSAC) would be invited to engage with this work. The Agency remained focused on refining its approach to student engagement, which was under consideration at Executive level. Jimena Alamao agreed there was scope for SSAC to operate more strategically. She had been struck by the high level of interest in SSAC vacancies, showing a high level of student interest in QAA's work.

23. Progress on devolved nations enhancement had been limited because of resource constraints. Recruitment for a new manager was underway following Amy Eberlin's promotion.

24. The first meeting of the Nursing and Midwifery Council Contract Advisory Committee was scheduled for the following week. [redacted]. The halfway point in the initial contract period was approaching.

25. It was noted that additional short-term capacity would be required to address ESG compliance risks. Prior to the organisational restructure, review operations had been

managed by individual method owners and governed through a QA manual framework. [redacted]. QAA's restructure provided an opportunity to address and correct such issues in time to embed the changes ahead of the 2028 ENQA review.

26. Caroline Blackburn presented the year-end financial report. [redacted]

27. Regulatory services had performed in line with budget expectations. [redacted].

28. [redacted].

29. [redacted].

30. [redacted].

31. [redacted].

Strategic Risk Register (Item 5 BD-25-26-03)

32. TY presented the updated risk register, which had received even more attention than usual in the context of executive discussions about the year ahead and the challenges facing the Agency. The risk associated with QAA's international position had been downgraded, as the risk had lessened over time. [redacted].

33. Two risks had been upgraded. The EQAR/ENQA-related risk had increased to reflect more visible issues and concerns regarding the alignment of new services with European standards. The people risk was also elevated due to current challenges around organisational capacity to implement strategic changes at pace while maintaining business-as-usual operations. A temporary solution would be presented to the Board to address this concern.

34. A new risk (O3) had been included concerning the quality and utilisation of data. [redacted].

35. [redacted]

36. [redacted]

37. [redacted]

38. [redacted]

39. The Board considered risk S8 around the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), noting that it had evolved from an operational risk to a strategic one. [redacted].

40. Caroline Blackburn reported that two internal documents had recently been launched: one outlining a framework for increasing AI literacy, and another providing guidance on the use of everyday AI tools, including considerations around ethics and data security. A programme of continuous improvement was underway to explore how AI could enhance operational efficiency within teams. As new products were developed, opportunities to embed AI for greater effectiveness were being actively considered.

41. It was suggested that the AI-related risks should be unpacked into two separate risks, internal and external. AI could be used as a mitigation tool, while poor implementation could amplify other risks.

42. [redacted].

43. Dani Saghafi suggested it might be useful to include key risk indicators in the register. **Action:** TY to consider the potential for a dashboard in due course.

44. The Board suggested that the description of some risks needed updating given how dynamic the mitigations were.

45. The Board **approved** the risk register subject to the many comments from the Board being incorporated into the next iteration.

Verbal Update on Quarter 1 performance (Item 7, oral item)

46. The annual plan for 2025-26 had been distilled into ten Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which were approved by the Board in June. The Executive team had been actively using these KPIs to assess and manage risks identified in the strategic risk register. [redacted].

47. [redacted].

48. Caroline Blackburn presented an update on Q1 performance. [redacted] – a seemingly strong position at this point in the year [redacted].

49. [redacted].

50. Costs had remained generally acceptable, although there had been pressure from unforeseen expenses and a lack of vacancy savings to offset them. Temporary staff had been required due to capacity constraints, as vacancies often existed within teams that were already under-resourced. Inflationary pressures had been accounted for, with pay and reviewer fees representing the largest portion of the cost base.

51. Three priority projects had been identified to address capacity constraints, as the same individuals had been responsible for delivering both business-as-usual (BAU) activities and change initiatives, which had proven unsustainable. Short-term actions to address these challenges included focusing on revenue generation to close the financial gap, creating additional capacity, driving continuous improvement to enhance efficiencies—although this had not yet yielded sufficient results—and developing consistent practices in preparation for the upcoming ENQA review.

52. To support the delivery of these projects while maintaining the pace of change and ensuring BAU continuity, it was proposed to create four to five new fixed-term positions across teams. [redacted].

53. [redacted].

54. [redacted].

Service Presentation; Business Development (Item 9)

55. Nick Bailey presented an update on progress to develop new sources of income for the Agency. [redacted].

56. QAA had reviewed user needs and adopted a governance model for services with a customer-centric approach. [redacted].

57. NB outlined the current services lifecycle model and maturity map, noting that the aim was to move services further along the growth curve through both a refresh of existing offerings and the introduction of new ones. All services had been assessed and the portfolio segmented, with a focus on three core activity areas: accredit,

advise, and collaborate. This work was intended to place services on a more sustainable footing, moving away from standalone activities.

58. Accreditation services were being evolved from one-off reviews to repeat engagement. The International Quality Review (IQR) was being developed into an accreditation model aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), allowing QAA to meet strategic client aims through the inclusion of optional modules. The merger of IQR and Elective Quality Review (EQR) was expected to result in greater delivery efficiency.

59. The advisory service set was evolving from a reactive product suite to a more structured and scalable model capable of meeting the needs of institutions at varying levels of maturity. These services were being repackaged into modular formats aligned with institutional challenges. New services would address all OfS conditions, and the Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) service would also adopt a modular approach.

60. [redacted].

61. [redacted].

62. [redacted].

63. [redacted].

64. [redacted].

65. [redacted].

66. [redacted].

67. [redacted]. The proposed products could be developed reasonably quickly if the capacity was there, and the Executive would return to Board in December with detail of the proposals.

68. [redacted].

Report on Financial Matters (Item 8, BD-25-26-05)

69. Caroline Blackburn presented the investment report. [redacted]

70. [redacted].

71. [redacted].

72. [redacted].

International Access to Higher Education Diploma (Item 11 BD 25-26-07)

73. RS rehearsed the context for the development of a potential international Access to HE Diploma, which had first been explored before the COVID-19 pandemic. This had been driven by demand from Access Validating Authorities (AVAs) to be able to offer the diploma in international markets. Preliminary work had been undertaken in 2022 to explore the feasibility of international delivery; however, several challenges were identified. Subsequent changes to the Access to HE Diploma framework addressed these issues within the domestic context, thereby creating an opportunity to revisit the development of an international diploma.

74. The reform of the Access Regulation and Licensing Committee (ARLC) had brought improved scrutiny to this initiative. There was a newly appointed Head of Access who also brought a fresh perspective. ARLC had considered the proposal at its last meeting and resolved not to submit a formal recommendation to the Board at this stage. Instead, the committee had opted to provide an update on key issues. The paper was therefore an interim update, with a further paper scheduled for submission to the Board in December. Since the initial development of the international access concept, the broader educational landscape and economic drivers had shifted significantly. Policy developments following the publication of the white paper would influence the future direction and focus of the qualification.

75. RH highlighted that a central concern of ARLC was the ambiguity surrounding the term "international access," which was often interpreted to mean international students entering higher education in the UK, but could also mean various other things, with the risk profile changing accordingly. Fazal Dad reported that ARLC had had a robust discussion regarding the nature of demand, progression pathways, associated risks, and reputational considerations.

76. The Board noted that the relationship with the AVAs had been shifted by the regulatory reset approved earlier in the year. If QAA decided an international diploma was not currently viable, there was still potential to expand the UK diploma, which more obviously fitted QAA's charitable objects, thanks to the regulatory improvements.

77. [redacted].

Appointments and Retirements to Board and Board Committees (Item 12 BD 25-26-08)

78. The Board **approved** the following appointments, following recommendation by the Nomination and Remuneration Committee:

79. To the Nursing and Midwifery Council Contract Advisory Committee, a co-option:

    In the category of: *the Board shall have the power to co-opt up to two additional independent members with relevant skills or experience from outside of the organisation to the Committee for such term as the Board considers appropriate (provided that the maximum term shall not exceed the maximum term of office for a Committee member). Co-opted members shall have the same status as Committee members unless otherwise specified on appointment by the Board.*

    Vanessa Davies, for an initial 3-year term until 23 September 2028.

80. To the Student Strategic Advisory Committee, for a first one-year term, following a competitive process and interviews, until 22 October 2026

    a) Shirley Tian

    b) Shani Louison-Thomas

    c) Hannah Walton

    d) Jessica Sanders

    e) Brijesh Gajjar

81. The Board noted the membership of the Student Strategic Advisory Committee and the areas of the sector it represented. Alex Stanley reported that the selection process had been more competitive than anticipated, with a high standard of applications. Those selected had reflected the diversity of the student body and their varied experiences.

82. [redacted].

Committee Reporting (Item 13, BD-25-26-09)

83. Wales Strategic Advisory Committee: Nicky Callow noted that this was her first meeting as Chair of the WSAC and that the committee had not convened for over a year. The meeting had primarily focused on operational matters, though there was recognition that future meetings could adopt a more strategic approach. It was reported that the Medr consultation had been issued earlier that day, and there were concerns within the higher education sector regarding both the content of the consultation and the perceived level of bureaucracy involved. NC expressed thanks to AS for delivering a presentation on quality and confirmed that student representatives would be included on the WSAC going forward.

RS, TY, Caroline Blackburn, Nick Bayley and VS left the meeting

Executive Pay Award (Item 14, BD-25-26-10)

84. [redacted].

85. [redacted].

86. [redacted]. It was **agreed** that having previous pay increases included in the paper would aid longer term decision making by the Board in respect of Executive team pay. **Action:** VS and Caroline Blackburn to include data.

87. A benchmarking exercise was planned for QAA in the new year [redacted].

88. [redacted].

89. [redacted].

90. [redacted].

Calling of the AGM (Item 15, BD-25-26-11)

91. The Board approved the notice of the AGM. Company members would join the teams meeting for the formal AGM business and an update from the CEO.

Any Other Business

61. There was none.

Date of the next meeting

62. The next meeting would be held on Wednesday 10 December 2025

Board of Directors Action List				
Minute:	**Action:**	**Owner:**	**Due Date:**	**Update:**

25-26-31	CB to correct typo in figures	CB		Completed
25-26-43	TY to consider a dashboard for the risk register	TY		Discussed at ARC – to consider longer-term.