



Douglas Blackstock Keynote Address at the 12th Higher Education International Conference (APQN/Macao Polytechnic Institute)

‘The Role of Quality Assurance Agencies and Working in Partnership for Home, Transnational and International Higher Education during the Pandemic’

25 November 2020

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to address this Conference.

Thanks to APQN and the Macao Polytechnic Institute for organising this international discussion in such an unprecedented context.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a fundamental impact on approaches to higher education across the globe, resulting in a dramatic and rapid move to remote methods of learning, teaching and assessment. It is hard to overstate the extraordinary effort by the higher education sector across the world that this represented. It was not only performed quickly and under extreme pressure, but it also accelerated change - bringing forward strategic plans and instigating new ways of working.

Quality assurance agencies across the world have needed to review and amend their approaches to meet the sudden, changing needs of the sectors they serve. The Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education adapted its own approaches, and has worked in partnership with the higher education sector in the UK and internationally to meet the challenges that COVID-19 has created.

About QAA

Many of you know us already, but for those who don't, QAA is the UK's higher education quality body.

We are an independent, not for profit, agency with an independent chair. We remain the only body recognised to assess the standards and quality of UK universities - we have statutory status as 'Designated Quality Body' in England, and we're trusted and recognised by governments in all four nations of the UK, working in partnership with funders and regulators.

It's a complex arrangement, with higher education being operated differently in the four UK nations. We deliver tailored quality approaches for each of the sectors, supported by UK-wide work to maintain a coherent system of quality.

Regulation of UK higher education

Higher education policy and regulation is devolved to the governments of the four nations of the UK. The statutory responsibility for regulating and registration of higher education providers sits with the respective national funders and regulators: the Office for Students in England; the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland; the Scottish Funding Council for Scotland; and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

The UK Quality Code applies across all jurisdictions, and QAA is the only body officially recognised to undertake independent assessments and evaluations which are in turn used by all four bodies to inform their regulatory decision making.

QAA also works with the representative bodies of UK higher education providers and our individual member institutions.

QAA's work

Some of this work includes:

- conducting independent peer review assessments in all UK nations, as the only recognised quality body
- maintaining the national frameworks and reference points - the UK Quality Code and Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications. The Expectations and practices of the UK Quality Code are a key reference point for UK higher education, and underpin all of QAA's assessments
- offering enhancement opportunities above these thresholds, as well as advice and guidance and effective practice for providers
- conducting in-country reviews of UK TNE in partnership with local agencies - QAA has conducted over 45 country reviews of the UK's TNE. We're the only UK organisation working in TNE that is fully endorsed by the representative bodies of the UK higher education sector and recognised in all four nations of the UK to deliver quality assessments.

This diverse range of work can be a challenge! But thankfully we have more than two decades of experience in doing it. We were founded in 1997, and today we have 268 QAA Member institutions across the UK. 95% of universities have opted for voluntary membership, and 98% of universities endorsed QAA in a government consultation on who should assess quality. We take quality seriously.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

Of course, in 2020 we are operating in an unusual context. Across the world, as we respond to the pandemic, the global higher education community has worked to transition to online and blended learning models. This has required extraordinary flexibility and speed on the part of higher education providers, but also strong cooperation to maintain quality.

Since March, QAA has produced public guidance (30+ briefings and resources) along with webinars and advice. These were developed with, and by, the higher education community, including student bodies, regulators and funders. The involvement of large numbers of staff from providers helped identify good practice in this early stage, which was disseminated across the sector. *(2,000+ delegates from 276 organisations attended webinars).*

It's important to stress that this was a global effort. Our International Partners' Forum to share experiences of organisations' responses to COVID-19 had over 50 attendees from more than 20 countries. So, we were able to publish International Examples of Practice in April which fed into providers' responses here in the UK. This included 5 examples from China, from Peking University to Shanghai Jiaotong University.

International partnerships

When we're faced with a global challenge like the COVID-19 pandemic, these partnerships are so important - it's essential to share experiences and learn from each other, in forums like this. We have learned a huge amount from our international partnerships this year.

We have close relationships and strategic links with many international quality assurance agencies. We're a full member of ENQA, we're listed on the European Quality Register (EQAR), and we're also one of only 7 agencies worldwide judged to be fully aligned with INQAAHE's Guidelines of Good Practice. We represent the UK in the Qualifications Beyond Boundaries Group (QBBG), a network set up by quality assurance agencies and regulators in seven countries involved in TNE. We're the only Agency ever judged to have been fully compliant with all European Standards and Guidelines.

And of course, QAA has observer status on the Asia-Pacific Quality Network. We are also member of the Cross-Border Quality Assurance Network launched in December 2016 under the Asia-Europe Meetings of Ministers of Education, aimed at building a cooperation platform for stakeholders of cross-border HE quality assurance in Asia and Europe.

QAA's engagement with institutions in Macao started in 2014 with a bespoke review of MPI. This engagement with Macao has continued and QAA has since worked with 6 of the HE institutions in Macao. This includes working with MUST (Macao University of Science and Technology) on the pilot of the DSES (Education Bureau) method for Institutional Quality Audit and the QAA International Quality Review (IQR) for the Macao Institute for Tourism Studies (IFTM).

Some of the areas of commonality internationally from our International Partners' Forum included the use of micro-credentials to assist portability of qualifications, and issues such as digital poverty.

The initial main challenges to emerge included not just the logistical challenge of moving online, but also how to maintain learning outcomes, the best methods of assessment, how to ensure accessibility and improve the student experience. After Easter, we then saw those new challenges emerging in the second phase - there was a need for flexibility among providers, and a focus on the student experience for 2020-21.

The impact of the pandemic on UK HE

The initial emergency sector response was an extraordinary effort - a transition to mass online learning that was both rapid and effective. Universities and colleges showed that, contrary to stereotype, they are able to move quickly, decisively and crucially, collaboratively. There was a real sector interest in maintaining quality and standards online, and in working together to do so.

After Easter, we then saw new challenges emerging in the second phase - there was a need for flexibility among providers, and a focus on admissions and transitions for 2020-21. We were able to produce admissions guidance in May, based on discussions with providers in April. They were scenario-planning then what digitised welcome weeks looked like, working closely with students' unions. They were considering online social and community spaces, and personalised support. There was strong collaboration - for instance, directors of estates across the sector to share knowledge about social distancing requirements on campuses. The discussion about blended learning approaches happened openly and constructively.

After moving out of the emergency transition period, we produced a piece of 'future proofing' guidance. I had conversations with around 150 VCs about what their planning for the next academic year looks like. There was a range of approaches, but underpinning them were four guiding principles.

- 1 That any move to onsite activity is safe and secure for staff and students.
- 2 That degree-awarding bodies maintain quality and standards in the move to flexible provision.
- 3 That providers engage with students and staff in planning changes to delivery and assessment of teaching and learning.
- 4 That provider planning scenarios are flexible and responsive to students' needs

It's important to note that not all providers experience these challenges in the same way. QAA's role involves supporting a wide range of providers, and we know many smaller providers have experienced unique, granular requirements. The reverse is also true - that in many cases, small and specialist providers have been nimble enough to adapt more easily. For instance, many larger providers are grappling with the challenge of how to personalise online learning. Students have increasingly preferred more personalised learning over the last decade and are now finding themselves in depersonalised mass online learning spaces. But we have found many independent providers with smaller cohorts have been able to tailor teaching and learning more directly to their students' needs. Some have been able to continue physically, in socially-distanced classrooms.

So, with this wide variation, our role in convening communities of practice to understand the issues has been really important.

Looking at the current picture, we recently gathered contributions from 60+ HEIs across the UK on their steps to secure standards and quality. My QAA colleagues Andy Smith and Derrik Ferney are presenting this work in more detail in the 4th Parallel Session tomorrow and I'd encourage you to join. The key lessons are about flexibility in planning.

- Most providers have maintained a careful and responsive strategic oversight. They've used steering groups to manage complexity and retain consistency and control. These have ensured that, for instance, assessment procedures can be revised, or rapid validations/modifications/approvals can be made in a way that maintains standards (with clear records). Crucially, planning has been flexible and responsive to student needs, often engaging with both students and staff in planning changes.
- We've seen universities creating cross-institutional expert groups to draw up design principles for 'online rich' blended delivery - recognising that it isn't enough to simply move existing modules online.
- There remain pressing questions around:
 - digital poverty among students/the robustness of IT systems generally
 - student transitions, and general wellbeing
 - staff capacity, especially in small and specialist providers
 - and of course, the wider economic picture and the impact it will have.

We have seen providers responding innovatively to all of these - for example, embedding community and social frameworks into online programmes to promote collective wellbeing. Students' unions and representative bodies have been particularly inventive in creating online spaces for student support. But these are big, complex problems.

And of course, the impact has not been confined to national borders.

There has been a range of challenges for TNE during the pandemic.

TNE in the pandemic

I mentioned earlier that part of QAA's role is in reviewing UK TNE, as part of our mission to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered.

TNE is extremely important to the UK. In the UK International Education Strategy, the UK Government has explicitly expressed interest in supporting TNE as a 'key growth area'. We see TNE as a significant part of internationalisation, development and globalisation in a connected world. It helps support government development agendas, and cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. It also brings economic value to both host and sending countries. The appetite for UK degrees abroad is already substantial: four out of five universities offer overseas higher education programmes in 225 locations worldwide, delivering UK higher education to over 690,000 students.

We may see demand increase as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as more students choose degrees in-country.

TNE has been impacted significantly by the pandemic. We saw different countries affected at different times and governments responding in different ways. The mitigating measures which TNE providers needed to introduce were not universal between countries or over time. We saw providers move to online delivery, bringing the practical challenges of adapting materials and approaches, building staff and student technical expertise, and ensuring the availability and reliability of online tools.

Beyond these practical challenges, there are some more existential questions:

- How do you emphasise the value of TNE provision without learning in a classroom location, and manage too the student experience and student expectation of a UK degree?
- How do you develop a sense of 'UK-ness' online for those considering TNE?

Our advice for UK institutions has been to work proactively and collaboratively with their TNE partners to help support their students, tailoring their approach to each partnership. But looking ahead, part of QAA's role is in exploring new solutions for these questions, working with our international partner bodies and through networks like APQN.

This year's disruption raises new questions about how best to assure the quality of TNE. Fortunately, we were not scheduled to undertake TNE reviews during this time, following completion and publication of our TNE review of Malaysia in 2019-20. (Although we have been running a comprehensive schedule of international quality reviews, consultancy and training online with appropriate checks and balances). But as many of you will be aware, we have been working to develop a new method for evaluating and enhancing the quality of UK transnational education in the post-pandemic landscape.

A new method for TNE review

Over 2018 and 2019, QAA, together with the UK representative bodies Universities UK and GuildHE, re-evaluated the UK's approach to its evaluation of TNE - this reflection on the effectiveness of the model in use reflects the UK's quality culture.

QAA was commissioned to develop and deliver a new approach for TNE review in July, by the UK HE sector through its representative bodies. The new approach will be accompanied by a five-year programme running from 2021-22 to 2025-26.

Our consultation closed on the 18th November, and we have had over 100 responses to the consultation and engagement in four virtual workshops including one specifically for international stakeholders. We are analysing the consultation responses at the moment, and we want to make sure we get it right - we will finalise the new Handbook and publish the new method by the end of January 2021. We will deliver the new programme in partnership from September 2021. We have received messages of support from quality bodies and regulators across the world including China, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Russia, and the UAE.

The focus for us is on ensuring the new method generates a richer range of outputs, with close working, relationship building and mutual benefits for both countries. We anticipate a greater emphasis on the student experience and outcomes, as well as quality enhancement. It will complement the UK approaches to quality assurance that are in place through different models.

The focuses on close working, relationship building and mutual benefits are particularly relevant in this current context. We have seen how important international partnerships have been in the pandemic, and they will be essential moving forward.

A post-pandemic future

The last thing I would share is that as we move forward, it's important to reflect on what this year has shown us in terms of international partnership in higher education.

We have seen agencies, providers and the international community working together to face the challenge - perhaps more collaboratively than ever before.

In such a complex and rapidly evolving environment, it remains critical that there is deep collaboration across borders in the higher education sector. Agencies must work in partnership with each other and with governments, regulators, institutions and students to ensure that we are prepared for what lies ahead.

In many ways, the pandemic has accelerated trends that were already apparent. Looking ahead, there are questions about micro-credentials and portability, the structure of the academic year, even what institutions should look like in the future.

We are conscious of the potential for positive reforms too (for instance in the UK, developments in lifelong learning, and localised collaboration between providers).

As we look ahead, the approaches we must hold onto are flexibility and collaboration. The initial transition saw a level of collaboration and cooperation that previously might not have been imagined, and that's the basis upon which we were able to provide guidance and continue working together.

Thank you.