

2018 QAA Annual Conference

Chief Executive's Keynote Address

Wednesday 25 April 2018

Welcome

Good morning.

Colleagues, it's a tremendous privilege to address you this morning at our 2018 UK Quality Summit.

As always, it's great to see so many friends and familiar faces here, and also to welcome colleagues joining us for the first time.

Thanks to all those giving their time to deliver so many informative sessions, including colleagues who have travelled from China, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to share their expertise with us. And, as ever, it's great to have our nearest neighbours from QQI in Ireland here too.

Many thanks also to the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and the University of South Wales, for being such excellent hosts.

Recent developments

2018 is a significant year for QAA, as it marks our 21st anniversary and - with overwhelming support from across the UK sector over the past 12 months - we're now the agency of choice for UK higher education quality and standards.

I'd like to thank each and every one of you who have supported QAA and voiced your confidence in us as the quality body for all the devolved administrations, and now the new designated quality body for England.

QAA's independence has always been key to providing the right balance between government, regulation and the sector. We're committed to continuing to play that role in the future in the spirit of co-regulation, the importance of which was underlined by Viscount Younger in a debate on the Higher Education and Research Bill in the House of Commons:

'We are also legislating to clarify that, where a quality body is designated, it will have sole responsibility for the assessment of standards. This keeps standards assessment at arm's length from government in a truly co-regulatory way.'

Viscount Younger of Leckie, House of Lords, 6 March 2017

Moreover, in a changing UK context with different approaches in different nations, we'll need to evolve our understanding of what co-regulation means, to incorporate the interests of multiple stakeholders, from students, employers and professional bodies, to our wider society. And balance this in the interests of the four nations that make up the UK.

So we won't be resting on our laurels. In keeping with the theme of this summit, we will continue to develop and innovate, and support the UK sector.

We're looking forward to working with all our partners and stakeholders to ensure the UK continues to benefit from an independent, internationally respected and forward-looking system of quality assurance.

This year, we said farewell to HEFCE, an organisation which has delivered much for our sector.

But we've also welcomed the new Office for Students in England.

And this August, a new UK-wide organisation, Advance HE, will become fully operational, led by Alison Johns. Alison and I have already held some productive meetings, and we are committed to working collaboratively, not competitively, for the benefit of the sector.

A strong, high quality UK sector

It has been another year of significant regulatory and policy change. It has also been a year in which UK higher education has been under intense public and media scrutiny.

There are issues which our sector must address - and work is already underway on many of them.

QAA, for example, is working with Universities UK, GuildHE and other sector partners on academic integrity, which I'll say more about a little later. Other bodies are taking leadership on issues such as pay, value for money, and the current review of post-18 education and funding.

It has undoubtedly been a time for reflection as a sector. But we shouldn't forget that there is also plenty to celebrate. So, here at our Quality Summit, I want to focus on the *quality* of our UK higher education system.

During the three years of our Higher Education Review, which ran from 2013 to 2016, we identified a wide range of good practice trends. They include:

- providers rewarding innovative and excellent teaching, and investing in staff development
- embedding employability in the curriculum and learning outcomes, to shape 21st century graduates
- developing digital literacy and technology-enhanced learning
- and promoting a global perspective for students through international partnerships and programmes.

These trends reflect how our sector continues to innovate and develop. It's this type of evidence that leads to our system being admired around the world, rather than the bleaker picture of a system in crisis, painted by some commentators.

Good practice case studies

We've also been building a database of good practice case studies. This growing collection showcases great examples of innovation, delivering positive impact for students.

Here are a few examples, to give you a flavour. We have almost 70 in our database, so I apologise in advance that I can only share a handful here.

QAA reviewers commended the **University of Sunderland** for its widening participation work to support young people leaving care to enter higher education.

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David and its Students' Union were praised for their promotion of a new interactive online platform to gather student feedback.

In Somerset, **Weston College** was commended for its range of support for higher education students, covering pre-enrolment, transition, study and progression.

Our review of **Robert Gordon University** highlighted its Talent Exchange initiative to widen work-related opportunities, by connecting local businesses and professional bodies with students and staff.

The **University of Northampton** was commended by QAA reviewers for its training for postgraduate research students engaged in teaching.

And the **London School of Business and Management** was praised for the continuing professional development of its staff, supporting them to become Fellows of the Higher Education Academy.

These are just a few examples and we're actively seeking new case studies each term by different themes, so do contribute.

Quality in action

Colleagues, this annual event gives me the chance to share with you some of the work we're doing on your behalf.

We've been focused on delivering the first year of our strategy and we're on track with a range of programmes, working with around 600 providers and a wide range of stakeholders across the UK.

Quality assurance and assessment

During 2017-18, we're scheduled to deliver around 220 reviews and annual monitoring events. And we have seen again that most institutions do well, with 18 commendations and 129 features of good practice so far.

But we have also had three further education colleges with unsatisfactory Quality Reviews, four alternative providers with unsatisfactory Higher Education Reviews and three alternative providers with unsatisfactory annual monitoring outcomes.

Across the UK, we are delivering quality assurance and assessment, working with the OfS to deliver operational elements of Year 3 of the TEF and subject-level pilots, advising on degree awarding powers, undertaking assurance of transnational education and strategic international engagement, and revising the Quality Code - more on that later.

Wales

Here in Wales, we're delivering the new Quality Enhancement Review, the first visit for which has just taken place. We're providing input to the Welsh government and stakeholders on the development of a reformed post-compulsory education and training system. And we've also been working to ensure we, as an organisation, comply with changes to Welsh language standards.

Northern Ireland

The next approach in Northern Ireland is yet to be confirmed, although there are indications that it may follow Wales and be more enhancement-led.

Scotland

In Scotland, we're delivering the first year of the latest enhancement-led approach and the new Enhancement Theme. We're also working to ensure that the rest of the UK can learn and benefit from the work in Scotland. This includes facilitating greater access for UK colleagues to Scottish events and holding other workshops around the UK, modelled on the programme in Scotland.

And a reminder to you that the 15th Enhancement Conference takes place in Glasgow on 7 June, which is a great opportunity to engage with developments and innovative thinking in this area.

England

In England, as the designated quality body, we're playing a key role in the design and implementation of a new quality system. As most of you will know, the OfS intent is to focus on outcomes, not processes. The conditions of registration will match the Expectations of the UK Quality Code, so we'll continue to test providers against the Code, to help the OfS make its regulatory decisions.

But once a provider is in the OfS system and remains within a tolerance band, there will be no intervention if risk is low. There will be monitoring, which may trigger interventions, as well as random sampling of at least 5 per cent of providers, by a process still to be designed.

But if a provider is not selected for this, it could mean no compliance visit from QAA for a long period.

On the other hand, if risk indicators trigger a review by QAA, it will be a public signal that all may not be well, which in itself could be reputationally damaging. This seems a significant motivator to ensure providers continue to meet the Expectations of the Quality Code.

This is a new type of regulatory relationship between English providers and QAA as the quality body. But it's not the only relationship we'll have. We will continue to work with the sector - individually and collectively - to provide assurance and enhancement services, albeit on a voluntary basis - much like our predecessor body, the Higher Education Quality Council.

Quality Code

This demonstrates the diversity and divergence of our systems across the four nations of the UK, but underpinned and unified by the UK Quality Code.

During this year, we've undertaken a consultation on the revised Quality Code on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, and last month the new Expectations and Practices were published. Many of you here today provided much valued contributions through your responses and attendance at workshops, for which we're greatly appreciative.

- **386** people attended our consultation events in November and December
- and there were **265** responses to the consultation itself.

We're now developing the Advice and Guidance for the Code. This will provide the detailed explanations that allow UK providers to understand what is expected of them and what they can expect of each other. Your engagement with this process remains high:

- **170** attended our April scoping events
- and **385** are already signed up for our Advice and Guidance workshops in May, which are now fully booked - so we're putting on an additional event just over the border in Gloucester, due to demand.

We expect to publish the full, final version of the Code in November.

The Quality Code acts as the glue for our UK higher education system. This latest evolution is streamlined and fit for the future, and should ensure all types of providers will remain at the leading edge of practice internationally, enriching and enhancing their students' experiences.

At times, the revision process prompted some vigorous and healthy debates, reminding us how much we value our coherent UK brand, which is more important than ever for our sector internationally, and for student mobility within our own country.

Academic integrity

I talked earlier about the good practice we have found. But the sector isn't without its issues and protecting the academic integrity of UK HE has been a major part of our recent work.

Academic fraud is a worldwide problem and we're working with counterparts in other countries to tackle this issue. At a recent conference in Washington, the Chief Executive of Australia's regulator said:

"If you think you don't have a problem with cheating, you just haven't found it yet."

We, as a sector, need be on the front foot.

We've recently received and - in some cases - investigated allegations about admissions, malpractice, academic fraud and the falsification of evidence in 19 alternative providers in London. Not all have been found to be valid concerns, but we've just published four reports with negative judgements, with one more to follow.

As well as responding to these allegations, we've also reflected on how, in some cases, our review processes failed to identify the alleged problems. We accept that academic fraud poses real challenges for traditional quality assurance, and we'll need to develop innovative new tools and approaches to tackle it.

Our other work in this area includes a project with Universities UK and GuildHE on degree standards, engaging with a wide range of other stakeholders, including a QAA and UUK breakout session on degree inflation at this Summit. A final report on the project will be presented to the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment this autumn.

Last October, we also published guidance for the sector aimed at combating the use of essay mills and contact cheating - where students pay someone to write their assignments for them. And in March this year, the Advertising Standards Authority upheld our complaint about the essay mill company, UK Essays, stopping them from using misleading advertising.

We're now planning to strengthen our capacity to tackle these issues, and work with sector partners to fight cheating and fraud in higher education, in all its forms.

Access to HE

Colleagues, we're proud to manage the scheme for the recognition and quality assurance of Access to HE courses in England and Wales. The Access to HE Diploma is a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university. It transforms lives. It delivers real impact and value.

The latest data show that the Access to HE Diploma continues to promote social mobility and widening participation. In 2016-17, over **24,000** Access applicants were accepted to higher education:

- **23 per cent** were from low participation areas (compared with 13 per cent of their peers with other qualifications)
- **32 per cent** were from ethnic minority backgrounds (compared with 26 per cent of their peers with other qualifications)
- **85 per cent** were over 21 (compared with 21 per cent of their peers with other qualifications)
- In fact, **100 per cent** of students over the age of 65 who applied for Sept 2017 entry were accepted (10 students) compared with 82 per cent of those with other qualifications (165 applicants).

We're also working with the Ministry of Defence, military charities and resettlement support organisations to improve information about Access to HE for service personnel and their families.

As our regulatory and policy landscape continues to shift, I believe that this important qualification must be safeguarded and properly funded for the future.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship

We're also committed to providing expert advice and guidance for providers, UK governments and devolved administrations.

As an example, at the beginning of this year we published an updated edition of our 2012 *Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education* guidance.

The original version already had significant national and international impact.

At our Quality Enhancement Network events, you told us that you use it to shape your curricula, to design and validate programmes, and to secure strategic and management buy-in for enterprise and entrepreneurship initiatives.

The guidance has also been influential with policy makers in the UK and internationally, including:

- the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
- the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
- and the European Commission.

The updated guidance has been adopted as best practice by the UN, and UK providers are using it to demonstrate the UK approach to their international partners. In response to demand in China - where all state universities are required to provide enterprise and entrepreneurship education - we've already translated it into Chinese.

Subscribers

Our programme of meetings with you, our subscribers, continues to provide really valuable insights, and we've talked to many of you here today about what you want and need from us, now and in the future.

At the end of last year, we launched a new online subscriber community - a virtual meeting space for discussions and knowledge exchange. It offers direct access to QAA experts and exclusive quality assurance resources. There are already 500 registered users. If you'd like to see a demo version, visit the subscriber services area during one of the breaks today.

We've also piloted our first regional liaison network meeting in Manchester, attracting a range of delegates from universities and colleges in the region. This will be a template for other regional events to be held across England in 2018, which I hope many of you will attend.

International

Looking beyond these shores, the success of UK transnational education (or TNE) is underpinned by our sector's world-class reputation. In 2016-17, there were 708,000 TNE students and it represents the main area of growth in UK higher education, in terms of student numbers.

Overseas audits were started by the Higher Education Quality Council, with the sector and for the sector, to protect the reputation of UK higher education. Because just one failing institution can threaten our hard-built international brand.

We've conducted overseas reviews since our foundation in 1997. Alongside domestic UK reviews, they have played a major role in winning the confidence and trust of international governments and regulators.

Most recently, we completed our 2017 review in Ireland and we're now well underway with our review in Hong Kong, where 14 UK partnership arrangements have been selected for review and case studies. The final reports on that are expected to be published in July.

It's not yet clear how the quality assurance of TNE will evolve, when key data sources for UK students - such as NSS and DLHE surveys - aren't captured for those offshore.

But on my international travels for QAA, I'm hearing that there is a lot of confusion about recent developments here. Overseas governments and regulators want assurances that UK overseas provision in their countries remains sound.

So there's a big job to be done in explaining the changes and QAA has been doing just that - upping our levels of international engagement and presenting the quality of UK higher education as world class.

In fact, just last Sunday I was at a conference in Cairo, addressing 400 delegates on the UK system and our risk-based approaches to quality assurance.

Looking ahead

So what does the future hold?

Just looking at the subjects being discussed at this summit shows the scale of development and innovation taking place in our sector:

- higher education apprenticeships
- academic integrity
- data and analytics projects
- quality assurance dashboards
- new regulatory frameworks
- student engagement
- cross-border quality assurance.

The list goes on and it will be interesting to try to predict what we'll be talking about next year!

For QAA, our designation as the quality body for England came into effect on 1 April 2018 and we're now working with the OfS to agree how this will take shape. It will include designing and implementing the new system of quality review, and undertaking the assessments for new degree awarding powers.

In designing an assessment process focused on outcomes in England, we're asking ourselves questions about the type of evidence review teams will need, the skills and experience reviewers will require, and the design of the new review method to provide reliable judgements that will support the OfS in making good regulatory decisions.

We'll also continue to deliver quality assurance and assessment for all nations, working with our partners and stakeholders in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

More broadly, as the UK's independent, expert quality body, we're committed to protecting the quality of our sector during this period of transition and change.

And we're committed to continuing to support and deliver value for you:

- as a sector - enabling UK higher education to maintain and project its reputation for world-class quality
- and on an institutional level - working with you to enhance the academic experiences of your students and to deliver the best possible student outcomes.

To do this - and to return to the theme of this summit - we'll need to continue to innovate to meet the challenges of the future, developing new approaches and tools for quality assurance.

And as a champion for UK higher education, both nationally and globally, QAA is ready for those challenges.

Thank you.