

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **QAA Scotland Committee**

#### **Preparation for the review of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework**

##### **Introduction**

1. This paper summarises the UK and Scottish policy context in which the forthcoming review of the Scottish HE Quality Framework will take place. It invites the Committee to reflect on this analysis and to give a steer to QAA officers on how best to engage with the review process.
2. This paper has three main sections:
  - A summary of the focus of the forthcoming review and key milestones for the review process
  - An overview of relevant developments in England, and at UK/Westminster level, which are likely to have some bearing on developments in Scotland
  - Consideration of some major issues which the forthcoming review is likely to address.

##### **The review process**

3. The timetable and locus for the review were initially developed and endorsed by the Scottish Funding Council's Quality, Equalities and General Purposes Committee [QEGPC] and have since been agreed with the partners in the Universities Quality Working Group [UQWG] - namely, SFC, QAA Scotland, Universities Scotland, NUS Scotland, and the HE Academy.
4. The starting point for the process is a very positive endorsement of the current arrangements, as demonstrated by this extract from SFC's paper to the most recent meeting of UQWG:

“The [QEGP] Committee's clear view was that the current arrangements for quality are sound, effective and broadly still fit for purpose. There is no problem or issue that urgently needs 'fixed'. On the contrary, there is a basis of considerable strength on which to continue building, using the partnership approach. The QEGPC agreed that the focus should be on those aspects that need adjustment or fine-tuning, responding to current and future needs and priorities, rather than radical change. The process should therefore be contextualised within a quality enhancement approach and the emphasis should be on updating and refining arrangements.”
5. Indeed, it has been agreed that the forthcoming activities should be referred to as an 'updating' of the current approach rather than a 'review', to avoid any impression that there is a desire or perceived need for radical change.
6. The Funding Council was also content for the process to be managed by the existing College and University QWGs (meeting separately and jointly as appropriate) without the need to set up a separate group along the lines of the former Joint Quality Working Group. The timetable has also been agreed: the process will commence in January 2011

and will be completed by the autumn of 2011, to allow time for any changes to be implemented by the start of Academic Year 2012-13.

7. All the QWG partners will be expected to contribute to the evidence base informing the review. As an initial contribution, QAA Scotland organised an event for the HE sector on 24 November in Glasgow, focusing on reflections on the current ELIR methodology, and the relationship between ELIR and enhancement. Many useful comments were made, which we will feed into the QWG discussions as appropriate. We will also be holding another event in the spring of 2011, aimed more at ELIR reviewers, and with a more practical focus on the operational details of review processes.
8. A parallel process of reflection and review is taking place around enhancement themes, managed by the Scottish HE Enhancement Committee (SHEEC). The current cycle of themes is due to end in the summer of 2011, and SHEEC is aiming to make a statement at the 2011 Enhancement Themes conference on 2 and 3 March about the next cycle of themes. It is premature to be definitive about what might emerge but lessons have clearly been learned from the current cycle, and it is likely that the future programme will build closely on the model of the current theme of the 21<sup>st</sup> century graduate.

### **The broader UK policy context**

9. In parallel with our engagement with the Scottish review, QAA is also involved in related policy developments in England and at a UK level. This section provides a brief overview of relevant issues, which in summary include:
  - QAA's current review and consultation on the next audit method in England – particularly the possibility of graded outcomes reporting on multiple aspects of provision;
  - The Browne review and its implications for both funding and quality assurance of the English HE sector;
  - The Westminster government's support for new private providers in HE and for shorter degree programmes; and
  - QAA's review and consultation on the Academic Infrastructure.
10. The remainder of this section discusses the above points in more detail.
11. QAA is currently consulting on the methodology for the next cycle of audit (to be called 'institutional review') in England and Northern Ireland, to start in AY 2011-12. The consultation document is available on the QAA website at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news/consultation/reviewconsultation.asp> . Over the ELIR 1 and 2 cycles, we in Scotland have taken the view that it is not a problem for QAA to be using different methodologies (and philosophies) of review in the various UK countries, provided that we can demonstrate equivalence in the summative judgements being made about quality and standards, so that Scottish HEIs cannot be disadvantaged in any 'league table' or other analysis of the outcomes of QAA review. Thus, while there are many interesting aspects of the new proposals for England (for example, the non-judgemental thematic element, changes to the timetable for reviews and reporting, etc) the most pertinent issues are the proposals for judgements on four aspects (threshold standards; quality of students' learning opportunities; enhancement of students' learning opportunities; and from 2012-13 quality of public information); and the proposal (as one option) that judgements should offer more outcome options, on a 4-point scale such as good, satisfactory, requiring improvement and unsatisfactory. At this early stage, it is by no means clear what the final format of reporting will be but it seems that the HE

stakeholders in England are less keen than in Scotland on the use of 'confidence' as the key concept in reporting.

12. The Browne review of student funding has made proposals for very significant changes to both the funding and the quality assurance arrangements for the English HE sector. It remains to be seen whether these proposals will gain Parliamentary approval. In particular, Browne's proposals (Chapter 6 of his report) for a merger of QAA with HEFCE, OFFA and OIA seem unlikely to go ahead in precisely that form, given statements by the relevant Minister which both recognise that QAA is not a quango, and which appear to acknowledge the importance of independent scrutiny of quality and standards. However, Aaron Porter, president of NUS, has put forward alternative proposals under which QAA would be expected to act more as a 'consumer protection' body for students as 'paying customers' of HE.
13. While avoiding speculation about specific outcomes, it seems likely that HE in England will be based on a model of greatly increased, and more differentiated, fees from AY 2012-13. This may lead to much greater focus on the student learning experience ("what am I getting for my money?"), and the link, if any, between a higher fee and a higher quality student experience. That might lead to wider discussion about what is being purchased (contact hours? Reputational value? Minimum service standards? Enhanced employability?) and how the student knows that s/he is getting their money's worth. And that in turn might lead to calls for QAA to generate rather different forms of information about quality. So despite the current timetable for development of the next QAA review model for England, which assumes the new methodology will be in place from 2011-12, there may be additional changes within the next year to address some of these broader issues about the link between fees and the student experience.
14. The new Coalition government in Westminster is on record as being in favour of a growth in private HE provision, both through the creation of new organisations with degree-awarding powers, and through the expansion of 'external examination' or franchising models, by which degree provision might be delivered by colleges or other bodies, using the awards of an existing HE institution. There is also strong interest from UK Ministers in developing shorter degrees, and potentially in presenting a more 'level playing field' in the funding and availability of full-time and part-time provision. Ministers also place a great deal of emphasis on student choice as a way of driving up quality, with major initiatives now underway on the accuracy, utility and currency of public information about HE provision, the publication of university 'employability statements', etc. All these factors may again lead to further changes in the environment for quality assurance and enhancement in England.
15. Strictly speaking, these are all matters for England and have no direct relevance for the work of QAA Scotland. But the HE sector operates in a UK (indeed, a global) context and it is inevitable that we will need to keep a close watch on these developments in order to come to a considered collective view about their potential impact on Scotland and hence our potential response.
16. At UK level, QAA is currently reviewing the 'academic infrastructure', which consists of a set of tools, precepts and frameworks aimed at providing consistency and common standards across the UK HE system. The academic infrastructure comprises subject benchmarks; programme specifications; HE qualifications frameworks; and a Code of Practice. Following an initial phase of review and consultation, QAA has concluded that the AI broadly remains fit for purpose and that it is perceived as useful and appropriate by the HE sector; but that some minor amendments are required to update and improve it.

(The final report of this phase is available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings/FinalReport.pdf> and a further consultation document on the next phase will be issued shortly). For example, the references in the Code to external examining may need updating in the light of current work being led by Universities UK on the external examiner system; and the Code section dealing with disabilities may benefit from updating to reflect recent changes in legislation.

17. It is highly likely that the revised academic infrastructure will continue to operate consistently across the whole of the UK. There may be opportunities to make more explicit references to the infrastructure as part of the Scottish updating process, for example in emphasising to a wider audience the multiple ways in which quality and standards are assured and enhanced.

#### **Issues to be addressed in the Scottish review**

18. As an indication of the issues likely to be considered as part of the review, the following extract from SFC's paper to the most recent meeting of UQWG may be helpful:

“At this point we expect that the following will be likely areas for consideration:

- How to sustain and deliver quality assurance and enhancement, and partnership commitment to them, in time of financial constraint?
- How to reduce the ‘burden’ on institutions and focus resources where needed, while continuing to discharge statutory duties effectively and appropriately?
- How to achieve ‘righter’ (not lighter) touch – which could include an increased reliance on institutional responsibility and ownership for quality, and further development of proportionality in the external elements, based on risk and track record?
- How effectively and appropriately to communicate/inform/provide appropriate reassurances about quality and quality enhancement to satisfy needs and requirements of a disparate range of audiences (including who has responsibility to communicate/inform about what, and how)?
- How to ensure that the dimensions of equality and diversity and sustainability are effectively and appropriately embedded within the quality arrangements and overall strategy, and for the Council how to ensure it delivers on its public body statutory duties, in this regard?

This would suggest that some more specific considerations might include:

- Institutional responsibility and ownership; institutional reporting to Council – what is the appropriate balance?
- Length of cycle of external review/frequency of review/scale and nature of external review model and scope for customisation?

- Judgements in external review (language of confidence statements) – what should these be and how important is it to maintain consistency in structure and terminology across sectors?
- How important is it to maintain similar key features (key principles, confidence statements, reporting to Council) for two sectors? Is current degree of convergence at level of principle, but not at detail, sufficient and appropriate?
- What more needs to be done on learner engagement and keeping the learner at the centre? Who should do what?
- What further work needs to be done on public information and communication regarding information about quality, responding to information needs of learners/institutions/SFC/SG/other stakeholders such as employers?
- Support for quality enhancement – SFC currently supports/contributes to a range of agencies which support and/or develop quality of the learning experience – some of which are of long-standing. How far does this range and profile of services/support for quality match anticipated future needs and circumstances? Is there scope/necessity for a review of priorities?
- What are the implications of changes in the university sector in England and how might this influence, if at all, the consideration of the Scottish university quality enhancement framework?
- What is the nature of the evaluation and monitoring we want (scale/degree of externality/other) in the next phase of evolution of the quality strategy?”

19. Starting with a meeting on 12 January 2011, QAA will engage with our partners to help plan and deliver the detailed timetable for the quality updating process, in order to engage with the issues listed above.

20. We may also have to be ready to address some new policy options from the Scottish Government, arising either from the financial cutbacks, from responses to developments elsewhere, or from new thinking by Ministers. These ideas may come to the surface in the Green Paper which we expect to be published around mid-December.

### **Issue for discussion**

21. QAA Scotland staff are looking forward to engaging positively in the review of the Quality Enhancement Framework. Based on the considerations outlined above, we think some of the key strategic issues which are likely to arise will include the following:

- Value for money
- Proportionality and responsiveness
- Public information

- Linkage between assurance and enhancement
- Quality, funding and accountability
- Alignment of systems within Scotland (college and HEI) and across the UK HE sector.

22. We would welcome comments from the Committee about the issues raised in this paper.

23. Update reports will be provided to the next meetings of the Committee on 9 March and 7 June, and there will be further opportunities at those meetings to engage with the review process.

#### **Benefit**

24. Advice and guidance from the Committee will help QAA officers to participate effectively in the updating process and hence ensure positive outcomes.

#### **Recommendation**

25. QAA Scotland Committee is invited to discuss this paper and to give a steer to QAA Officers on how best to engage with the forthcoming review of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework.

#### **Financial implications**

26. None

#### **Risk implications**

27. None

#### **Further information**

28. Further information on the material covered in this paper is available from Bill Harvey ([b.harvey@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:b.harvey@qaa.ac.uk)) or Thelma Barron ([t.barron@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:t.barron@qaa.ac.uk))