Introduction

The event was convened to consider the consultation on *Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland*\(^1\). The event focussed on the how the arrangements would apply to quality assessment in Wales.

Summary of all the workshops

- The argument for change has still not been effectively made – some representatives felt that it would be better to enhance the current system;
- There are a number of concerns regarding the practicalities, including whether the external examiner system could be made to work effectively;
- There was agreement in principle that governing bodies could have a greater role in overseeing quality assurance;
- The governing bodies, as they are currently constituted, do not have the expertise to assure the funders about quality;
- A risk-based approach presents a number of problems and there is still some distance to travel with the proposals in clarifying what this would mean in practice;
- In Wales, it is difficult to assess how the changes would be implemented given the HE (Wales) Act and the timing complications;
- Involving the student voice is crucial and students should be at the heart of designing any quality assurance system. Ensuring that the governing body (and quality assurance) take account of the student voice, and embedding the student voice at all institutional levels (which is a strength in Wales), should have been included in the proposals;
- The role of the Welsh language in external examining should be more explicit in the external examining proposals;
- The potential impact of the Teaching Excellence Framework in England will need to be taken account of.

\(^{1}\) [www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/review/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/review/)
Summary of the outcomes of the workshop discussions.

Governing Bodies

Do you agree that more emphasis should be placed on the role of a provider’s governing body to provide assurances about the quality of the student academic experience and student outcomes?

- There is agreement in principle with the proposals that the governing body should be in a position to provide assurance regarding quality. However, as they stand, governing bodies would not be able to do this. The detail/design needs to be carefully constructed. Factors that should be considered include: cost implications, any legal liability, the need for specific training for governors, the risk of micro-management of the institution by the governing body, and the balance between compliance and assurance.
- For Wales, the timing of this consideration is unfortunate as, until the ramifications of the HE (Wales) Act become clear, it will be difficult to make definitive judgements.
- Involving the student voice is crucial. At the moment, students are generally not aware of the role of the governing body. How to include this, and embed the student voice at all institutional levels, is something that the document could have considered, and in language that would appeal to the students’ interests.
- Some of the suggestions are similar to the current process and it’s not clear whether the new approach either adds to the current system or introduces too many new elements.

What might Governing Bodies need to do in order to do this?

- The current skill-set of governing bodies needs to be addressed for this to be workable. A considerable amount of different training, from what is currently supplied, would be necessary. In addition, it might be necessary for governors with more expertise in quality matters to be recruited.
- Governing bodies are often seen as a ‘rubber stamp’ by institutions and this would need to be addressed.
- A robust approach needs to be taken regarding the data provided to governing bodies. Retention, complaints, attainment, and employment/employability were considered appropriate to consider.
- It is important to contextualise the data that is provided to governing bodies.
- There would be a need for some external oversight of the governing body as it is impractical to rely on an institution’s internal assessment.
- Institutions were likely to need to employ external consultants to provide assurance to governors, in the same way as they do for financial assurance.
Do you agree that the funding bodies’ verification of an institution’s review methodology provides a reasonable mechanism through which to operate risk-based scrutiny of a provider’s arrangements to secure a good and improving student academic experience and student outcomes?

- There are some concerns regarding a risk-based approach, which can result in negativity. If this is implemented there would need to be effective and sector-wide sharing of best practice.
- The argument could more effectively be made for the suggested changes – it was not clear why there was not an attempt being made to enhance/improve the current system, instead of proposing a move to a new system.
- Clarification would be needed regarding how ‘outcomes’ are interpreted.

Externality

*Are the proposals for use of external scrutiny sufficiently robust?*

- Care should be taken regarding external scrutiny, as while some of the principles are sound they may not be practical.
- Welsh medium external examiner issues should have been addressed more specifically through the consultation. Responses to the consultation will need to address this area explicitly. Currently, there is inconsistency in Welsh medium external examination processes. Welsh medium should be considered in the design process from the beginning rather than added on afterwards.
- There should be some consideration given to the implications of the Competition and Markets Authority guidance on public information, and how this might contribute to quality assurance.

**Do you agree with the proposals to strengthen the external examining system?**

- The cost implications should be considered. The lack of money in this area means that external examiners will be asked to do a lot for little recompense.
- Some form of enhanced student involvement in this process would be welcome and capturing the student voice needs to be a central design feature.
- There should be more focus in the document on why these changes are necessary and on the potential benefits of the new system.

*Do you think this will be an effective means of providing assurance about academic output standards?*

- There is the danger of duplication of PSRB and internal review processes. The number, diversity, and range of different approaches taken by PSRBs makes it difficult to compare outcomes of their assessment.
Concerns were expressed that making the process more onerous for external examiners (eg by requiring them to undertake additional training) will lead to shortages in staff willing to undertake this role.

Wales needs to be able to address issues where it appears that the quality of provision is at risk of becoming inadequate – the proposed measures would be likely to only identify areas where quality is already inadequate.

**Do you have any thoughts on how academic output standards might be calibrated?**

- Part of the UK’s reputation is due to the transparency of its quality assessment. There is an uncertainty regarding how public the outcomes of PSRB and/or internal review outcomes should be – will there be an expectation that these be published?
- It would be useful to include a sentence stating that the standards are equivalent to the external examiner’s university.

**Are there specific sets of data which the funders should consider in assessing quality?**

- There is a danger that assessments become all about data, which means that qualitative aspects aren’t captured. In Wales, it is important that we take account of some of the value added measures that can’t be easily measured and the good things that we do.

### Summary of the outcomes of the plenary discussion

**Are there any particular areas pertinent to the devolved nature of higher education in Wales that you feel we should have considered further?**

- The uncertainty regarding the HE Act provides particular complications when trying to understand what external scrutiny will look like. There is a balance to be struck between institutional process and the national scrutiny framework.
- Widening access to HE is problematic, especially regarding deprivation, in terms of available datasets. The outcomes data that is likely to be considered does not include a measure of learning gain, or distance travelled by learners.
- Some specific aspects of legislation, eg Welsh Language Act need to be taken into account. This includes how PSRBs operate, as well as other bodies. The complexity of the devolved context should be recognised.

**For Wales, are there any particular areas of the proposal that you feel should be concentrated on during the more detailed design phase?**

- The existing work on the student voice in Wales is a platform to build on. It is important to emphasise this in any new/updated quality assurance system.
• Because of the nature of Wales, and its smaller number of HEIs, there is an opportunity to gain considerable benefits for coherence and consistency. If we can't achieve this in Wales then England will struggle given number and diversity of providers.

• There is an opportunity for increased engagement of institutions with the funding council on quality assurance, and also for the sharing of good practice.

• It would be helpful to have more information on how quality enhancement (including Future Directions) would be considered as part of a new quality assurance system.

For Wales, are there any proposals not referred to in the document that you feel should have consideration? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion.

• It would have been useful for the role of the Welsh language in external examining more explicit, and for there to be more support for the Welsh language within the consultation document.

• If there is a national training scheme for external examiners, it will also need to be available in Welsh.

• The potential impact of the Teaching Excellence Framework will need to be built in, and the ramifications for other different jurisdictions and legislative contexts needs to be considered.

• Post Graduate Taught and Research provision should be addressed holistically within any quality assurance system.

Patricia Price Thinking Points:

• Still many concerns around why there is the need for change. The current system has many good aspects which could be adjusted/improved rather than overhauled. It is also still not clear how the new system will work.

• There are ongoing concerns about cost, where the burden of expense will fall, and whether this is going to result in a financial burden on institutions that are already having to deal with a difficult financial context.

• Many institutions have very strong partnerships with their students who don’t seem central enough to the proposals. It would be a shame to introduce any mechanisms that diminish their current role.

• It is also unclear regarding the how the proposals link to enhancement. League tables and data tend to drive behaviour and if there is more emphasis on data, an opportunity may be missed to engage in partnership regarding enhancement.

• Many students are applying to be QAA reviewers, which has been a very positive development, and there is a concern about losing that.

• It is unclear how the proposals fit with the HE (Wales) Act.
It is also unclear how burden on institutions can be reduced, in context of making proposals work and being meaningful. There is a danger that this becomes simply another tick box exercise and that institutions will spend their time demonstrating that they are doing a good job, rather than doing a good job.

**Ebbi Ferguson Thinking Points**

- There is a good underlying student narrative at present which should be preserved.
- Risk-based approach is not necessarily the way to go.
- There should be more focus on improvement, which should be continuous not just periodic.
- Regular review gives students opportunity to get involved and helps them to influence developments.
- Wise Wales’ work, and the student partnership conference has progressed the partnership agenda.
- We need to extract information from students and keep them engaged. It is not clear from the current proposals how this might be addressed.
- Given the political climate and devolution, there is the potential to have a separate Wales process which is more student-focussed and keep students at the heart of the process.