



**QAA**

A large graphic composed of several interlocking puzzle pieces. The central piece is a dark grey circle containing the title. Surrounding it are other pieces in shades of grey and purple, some of which are missing, creating a fragmented effect.

# UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Part A: Setting and maintaining  
threshold academic standards

Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level

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# Introduction

The following subsumes the various subject benchmark statements and the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and forms a Chapter of the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

## The Quality Code

The Quality Code is the definitive reference point for all those involved in delivering higher education which leads to an award from or is validated by a UK higher education provider. It makes clear what institutions are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of all higher education providers. These Expectations express key matters of principle that the higher education community has identified as important for the assurance of quality and academic standards.

## Introduction to this Chapter

This Chapter provides an overview of the series of subject benchmark statements which have been developed by QAA in consultation with the sector, and which set out guidance about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. The Chapter does not include the details of specific benchmark statements for individual subjects, but links to these are provided.

This Chapter also introduces the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark (FDQB)*, which describes the distinctive features of a Foundation Degree in terms of its purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes. Again, a link is provided to a more detailed document specifying the FDQB in more detail.

Those referring to this Chapter may find it useful to refer to the following Chapters, which also contain advice relevant to the development and design of higher education awards:

- *Chapter A1: The national level*
- *Chapter A3: The programme level*
- *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*

# Expectations about the subject and qualification level

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the subject and qualification level which higher education institutions are required to meet:

**All higher education programmes of study take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements.**

## Subject benchmark statements

Working closely with the higher education sector, QAA has published subject benchmark statements for a range of disciplines to set out clearly the academic characteristics and standards of UK programmes of study. Some benchmark statements are combined with, or make reference to, professional standards required by external professional or regulatory bodies in the discipline.

Subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions (HEIs) when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to HEIs in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards.

Subject benchmark statements allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design and can stimulate academic discussion and debate upon the content of new and existing programmes within an agreed overall framework. Their use in supporting programme design, delivery and review within HEIs is supportive of moves towards an emphasis on institutional responsibility for standards and quality.

Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area.

At present, benchmark statements exist in four categories. These are:

- Honours degree subject benchmark statements<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Honours-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Honours-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Master's-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Master's-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx)

- Master's level subject benchmark statements<sup>2</sup>
- Subject benchmark statements for the health professionals<sup>3</sup>
- Scottish benchmark statements<sup>4</sup>

## The Foundation Degree qualification benchmark

A qualification benchmark describes the distinctive features of an individual qualification at a particular level within the Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland or the Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland. It describes the qualification in terms of its particular purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes, but it does not include subject-level detail.

The Foundation Degree qualification benchmark is designed to be used as a reference point in setting and assessing standards for foundation degrees. It does not expect or require compliance and it should not be used to prescribe or to regulate. Rather, it should be used with other reference points to inform and clarify matters concerning intentions, expectations and achievements, and for quality assurance purposes.

The qualification benchmark describes the distinctive features of a Foundation Degree in terms of its purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes. In doing so it provides a reference point to:

- assist those directly involved in designing or validating Foundation Degree programmes
- provide general guidance for describing the generic learning outcomes for the Foundation Degree
- provide general guidance for strategies on teaching, learning and assessment
- support internal and external quality assurance
- help interested parties to understand the purpose, generic content and outcomes of Foundation Degree programmes and to answer the question: what are Foundation Degrees?

The complete Foundation degree qualification benchmark may be found at [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx)

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<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Benchmarking-academic-and-practitioner-standards-in-healthcare-subjects.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Benchmarking-academic-and-practitioner-standards-in-healthcare-subjects.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Scottishbenchmarkstatements.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Scottishbenchmarkstatements.aspx)

## Further information and additional references

References are given here to material which higher education providers may find useful in relation to the topic of the Chapter. They do not form part of the Quality Code, but as each Chapter is developed by an expert advisory group, the status of these materials (and others not listed) may be reconsidered, and the views of the higher education sector more broadly sought through public consultation. Additional references may also be added: this is not intended to be a comprehensive resource.

Master's degree characteristics

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Masters-degree-characteristics.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Masters-degree-characteristics.aspx)

Doctoral degree characteristics

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Doctoral\\_characteristics.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Doctoral_characteristics.aspx)

Recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognition-scheme-for-subject-benchmark-statements.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognition-scheme-for-subject-benchmark-statements.aspx)

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