

Recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements

Third edition

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Preface

1 The first subject benchmark statements were published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 2000 and 2002. Following publication of the second tranche of statements, QAA worked with the academic community to develop the Recognition scheme as a means by which the case for any further new statements could be evaluated.

2 The Recognition scheme was published in 2004. Between 2004 and 2009, a total of six new statements were developed and published under it. A complete list of published statements can be found on QAA's website at www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statements.aspx.

3 In 2009, QAA initiated a review of current arrangements for the development of new subject benchmark statements and the review of existing statements and, working with the Steering Group for Benchmarking, revised the text of the original Recognition scheme. The revised text was subject to sector-wide consultation between April and July 2010.

4 In 2012, following the introduction of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), the Recognition scheme was further revised. Responsibility for strategic oversight of subject benchmarking activity was passed to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education Steering Group (the Quality Code Steering Group), and the Steering Group for Benchmarking disbanded. This third edition of the Recognition scheme has been updated to reflect this change and the introduction of the Quality Code more generally; the principles for recognition and other aspects of the process remain unchanged.

5 The Recognition scheme sets out:

- the **principles** against which QAA, working in consultation with the Quality Code Steering Group, will form a judgement on whether or not it is appropriate for QAA to support the development of a new benchmark statement
- the **process** from an initial expression of interest to making a formal submission under the scheme and, should the submission be approved, to preparing a draft new subject benchmark statement
- arrangements for the review and revision of existing benchmark statements.

6 The Quality Code Steering Group is a committee convened by QAA to take strategic oversight of the Quality Code. Members of the Quality Code Steering Group are representatives from higher education sector bodies across the UK. In relation to subject benchmarking activities, QAA and the Quality Code Steering Group draw on advice from academics who have experience of quality assurance at a senior level within higher education, in addition to subject specific expertise.

Introduction

The purpose of subject benchmark statements

7 The development of subject benchmark statements was one of a set of linked recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education Report of 1997 (commonly referred to as the Dearing Report). Together with the development of national qualification frameworks, programme specifications, and a code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards, subject benchmark statements were seen as a means of making more explicit the nature and level of academic standards¹ in higher education and, in turn, providing a foundation for students, employers and others to have confidence in the academic awards of higher education institutions. Collectively, this set of reference points and guidance was known as the Academic Infrastructure. In 2011, following a period of evaluation and consultation, the Academic Infrastructure was incorporated within and replaced by the Quality Code.² The Quality Code is maintained by QAA on behalf of the sector to give all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality of their programmes and the standards of their higher education awards.

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

The nature of subject benchmark statements

9 Subject benchmark statements are intended to:

- make explicit the nature and characteristics of awards that carry the subject in their title and/or which include a significant proportion of teaching and learning in the subject
- acknowledge the difference and diversity of programmes in the subject within agreed limits set by the subject community itself
- allow for variety and flexibility in the design of programmes and allow for innovation within an agreed conceptual framework
- explain the conceptual framework that gives the subject its coherence and identity
- set out the attributes and capabilities expected of graduates in the subject, in order to indicate general expectations of standards in awards
- establish or reflect a consensus within the academic community on the nature and standards of awards.

10 Subject benchmark statements are not intended to be a specification of a detailed curriculum or to prescribe approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

11 All subject benchmark statements articulate a 'threshold' or minimum standard. Many also provide statements on 'typical' or modal standards and, in addition, a few describe excellence.

¹ The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award (for example, a degree). Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students are managed to help them to achieve their award. See www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Quality%20Code%20General%20introduction%20Dec11.pdf.

² For further information, see www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code.

12 The majority of subject benchmark statements present content under the following broad headings:

- introduction
- defining principles
- nature and extent of the subject
- subject knowledge, understanding and skills
- generic skills
- subject-specific skills
- teaching, learning and assessment
- benchmark standard.

13 Subject benchmark statements begin from the premise that they are UK-wide in application. Where there are differences in professional and statutory regulations and qualification arrangements in Scotland, separate subject benchmark statements have been drafted and published as appropriate.

The relationship between subject benchmark statements and expectations or requirements of external bodies including professional, statutory or regulatory bodies

14 Higher education providers may offer programmes in some subject areas which are recognised or accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB) external to the provider. Examples of such bodies include the General Medical Council, the Engineering Council, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, the Architects Registration Board and many others. In cases where a programme is externally recognised or accredited, the benchmark statement may not be the sole point of reference that higher education providers will draw upon in designing, delivering or reviewing their programmes. Arrangements for external recognition or accreditation may mean that the higher education provider has to take account of the requirements of the relevant body, which frequently take the form of competences required for proficiency or practice. In such cases, the subject benchmark statement may provide additional guidance for programme providers around academic standards not covered by PSRB requirements. In some instances, the subject benchmark statement will have been designed to reflect the requirements of a particular PSRB; the relationship between academic and professional or regulatory requirements will be made clear within individual statements.

15 In addition to PSRB requirements, some higher education providers may also choose to take account of national occupational standards such as those identified by the Sector Skills Councils.

Benchmarking at different academic levels

16 The majority of subject benchmark statements have been developed at the level of the bachelor's degree with honours, which is located at level 6 of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and level 10 of *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*. Some statements also cover master's degrees, which are at level 7 and level 11 of the FHEQ and the Scottish framework respectively. QAA considers proposals submitted to the Recognition scheme for both bachelor's degrees with honours and master's degrees. Awards at other academic levels, for example, Foundation Degrees, are often highly specialised, for example reflecting local employer needs, making the development of national-level reference points challenging.³

The use of subject benchmark statements

17 Subject benchmark statements provide academic staff and higher education providers with a point of reference in the design and development of degree programmes and a framework for specifying intended learning outcomes. It may be the case that more than one statement is relevant to a programme or that the programme lies outside the subject coverage of the statements published to date. In such instances, higher education providers may draw upon more than one statement according to the emphases of the particular programme and would be expected to consult the appropriate national qualification descriptor for generic guidance.

18 Subject benchmark statements are also one of a number of external sources of information that can be drawn upon for the purposes of both internal and external review, and for making judgements about threshold standards being met. They are used in conjunction with other relevant documentation to enable reviewers to come to a rounded judgement based on a broad range of evidence. This evidence may include relevant programme specifications, the associated documentation of the relevant PSRB, the frameworks for higher education qualifications, and the provider's own self evaluation documentation. Subject benchmark statements can also be used by external examiners in considering whether the design of a programme and/or the threshold standards of achievement of students are comparable with those of other higher education providers. The statements may also provide PSRBs with academic standards expected of graduates.

19 Subject benchmark statements provide an immediate starting point for discussion and reflection within teaching teams and between teaching teams and reviewers. It is appreciated, however, that it may take some time for providers to take into account newly published statements through their internal processes of periodic review.⁴

20 Although not produced explicitly for this purpose, 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.

Subject benchmark statements and arrangements for quality assurance in a broader European context

21 The UK is part of the intergovernmental initiative, commonly referred to as the Bologna Process, which aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). One objective of the Bologna Process is to make Europe's higher education systems more transparent and to facilitate the transfer of students between countries. The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)⁵ provides a mechanism for relating the qualifications frameworks of different countries to each other. The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland (2001) and the FHEQ (2008), which describes the achievement represented by higher education qualifications granted by higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, have both been verified as compatible with the FQ-EHEA, in 2006⁶ and 2008⁷ respectively, so meeting the requirement set for participating countries by the 2003 Bergen ministerial Communiqué.

³ A 'qualification benchmark' exists for Foundation Degrees that offers generic guidance further to the qualification descriptor but which does not offer guidance at a subject or sector level. See www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx.

⁴ QAA does not expect higher education providers to refer to new or newly-revised subject benchmark statements during its review processes until one year after they have been published, although higher education providers may begin using the new reference points sooner should they wish to.

⁵ Available at: www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf.

22 In addition to compatibility between the UK's national qualification frameworks and the European framework, some subject communities have entered into mutual recognition agreements, which may be reflected in common standards identified between the UK and other European countries. There have also been attempts to identify points of convergence across higher education systems in Europe at a subject level through, for example, the Tuning Project. The Tuning Project, which is funded by the European Commission, aims to make recognition of qualifications easier by identifying common points of reference that relate to generic skills and graduate attributes, as well as subject-specific competences. The subject benchmark statements have often been used as the starting point for these sorts of exercise.

The Recognition scheme

23 The Recognition scheme provides a means by which the case for new subject benchmark statements can be evaluated and new statements can be developed. The scheme enables QAA to respond to subject areas that are not covered within the current published statements. QAA, advised by representative subject experts and the Quality Code Steering Group, recognises the authority of statements through their formal publication.

24 The Recognition scheme is UK-wide in its application, as is the Quality Code as a whole. However, where potential new statements are specific to the higher education sector in Scotland, these proposals will be handled by QAA Scotland and will be subject to separate consultation with higher education providers in Scotland.

25 The Recognition scheme seeks to manage effectively the potential proliferation of subject benchmark statements through a process which enables a judgement to be reached regarding matters of subject identity, sufficiency and representation.

26 The principles underpinning the Recognition scheme are intended to be inclusive and overarching in nature. The scheme is intended to allow for both the development of new statements and the incorporation of new subjects within existing statements through their review.

27 In reaching a decision on the case for a new subject benchmark statement, QAA works closely with the Quality Code Steering Group and other advisers with experience in quality assurance as well as subject-specific expertise. QAA may also consult academic subject associations and networks and/or PSRBs in cognate areas for a view on whether the subject under consideration has sufficiency and distinctiveness in terms of a conceptual framework such that it can be regarded as a separate subject for the purpose of benchmarking. A key principle of this process is openness so that all interested parties are aware of the initiative and have the potential to be involved.

⁶ Verification of the compatibility of the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland with the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area is available at: www.enic-naric.net/documents/QF-Scotland_en.pdf.

⁷ Verification of the compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA) is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Verification-of-the-compatibility-of-The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England--Wales-and-Northern-Irel.aspx. The 2008 self-certification exercise included the Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales (CQFW).

Principles for recognition

28 QAA, working with individual subject experts and the Quality Code Steering Group, will form a judgement on the appropriateness of supporting and recognising the case for a new subject benchmark statement on the basis of evidence against the following principles.

- The subject has sufficiency and a distinctive subject community
- The proposal is representative of the whole subject community and supported by the views of cognate subject communities
- The extent to which existing statements are insufficient
- The extent to which a new statement is necessary

29 A decision may be made to support a new statement or to incorporate the subject within an existing statement by initiating its review.

The subject has sufficiency and a distinctive subject community

30 Proposals need to demonstrate that a distinctive community exists for the subject for which a new statement is proposed and that the subject has a shared conceptual framework, and sufficiency and distinctiveness to merit a separate statement. Proposals should seek the views of, and demonstrate support from, cognate subject communities for a new statement or for the incorporation of the subject within existing statements.

The proposal is representative of the whole subject community

31 The proposal will need to explain the basis on which it has a legitimate claim to represent, and have the backing of, the subject community in proposing the case for developing the statement. The proposal will need to provide evidence that there has been consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant subject bodies, for example, PSRBs.

The extent to which existing statements are insufficient

32 The proposal will need to demonstrate that existing statements are insufficient to serve the needs of the subject community. The principal reasons for this would be because:

- the subject does not share the conceptual frameworks of existing statements
- a number of statements are only partly relevant, or of limited relevance, such that the translation of academic standards to the subject would, in effect, result in a separate statement
- accommodation of the subject cannot be achieved by the review and revision of an existing statement.

The extent to which a new statement is necessary

33 The proposal will need to demonstrate that a new or revised statement would provide the benefits of a wider understanding about the scope and nature of the subject and the academic standards underpinning it. This could be desirable for one or more of the following reasons.

- The subject is growing and more degree programmes are being provided in it
- A degree in the subject may be required for entry into a profession, but there are no explicit academic standards associated with the subject for this purpose. There may also be a lack of understanding within the relevant profession of what level of attainment can be expected of a graduate in the subject, or of its appropriateness for entry into the profession

- The prospective benefits of agreed and explicit standards in the relevant subject have been highlighted by, for example, external examiners and validating boards, higher education providers, subject groups, or stakeholder organisations.

The recognition process

34 The process for achieving recognition is outlined below.

Step 1 - an expression of interest is received by QAA

35 QAA receives or is notified of an expression of interest, often from an academic subject association or network or a PSRB, in developing a new subject benchmark statement. This expression of interest would normally be announced on QAA's website in order to ensure that the wider academic community is kept informed and is able to be represented and involved in the process. QAA informs the Quality Code Steering Group that a new expression of interest has been received. QAA will have an initial discussion with the proposing body around its expression of interest and will outline the nature and intention of subject benchmarking and the steps involved in the recognition process.

Step 2 - QAA receives a formal proposal for evaluation against the principles for recognition

36 QAA will consider a formal proposal for a new subject benchmark statement through evidence submitted against the four headings set out in the principles for recognition (see paragraphs 28-33). Submissions should demonstrate consultation not only with the defined subject community for its support in developing a new statement but also with cognate subject communities. PSRBs active in the subject area should also be consulted for their views. As stated above, QAA may also decide itself to consult the views of cognate subject communities in reaching a decision on the case for a new benchmark statement.

37 Information submitted as evidence against the four areas set out in the principles for recognition (see page paragraphs 28-33) may take the following forms:

- the number and types of providers of degree programmes in the subject; current student numbers across the UK enrolled on degrees in the subject; and trends relating to changes in the nature and/or size of provision
- an indicative list of the titles of award to be covered by the statement
- where relevant, arrangements for student progression to professional status and arrangements for accreditation and exemption from professional examinations.

38 Proposals will need to demonstrate how a new statement would contribute to the existing framework of reference points for quality assurance, and how it would relate to other subject benchmark statements - for example, that the subject is frequently offered either jointly or in a combined degree programme with another subject covered by an existing statement, or that the new statement would provide a more complete subject coverage in a wider subject field.

Step 3 - in consultation with the Quality Code Steering Group, QAA decides whether to support the development of a new statement

39 On the basis of the evidence submitted as part of the formal proposal, the views of representatives of the higher education sector with experience of quality assurance and the necessary subject-specific expertise will be sought on whether to support the development of a new statement (or to initiate the review of an existing statement). The views of these referees will be passed to the Quality Code Steering Group. The outcome will be made public on QAA's website in case there are other additional subjects interested in being incorporated

into the review of an existing statement. In reaching its final decision, QAA may request that further evidence be submitted against any or all of the four headings set out in the principles for recognition (see paragraphs 28-33), which will be considered by the subject expert representatives selected as referees. In cases where a decision is made not to proceed, the subject community can resubmit its proposal for consideration after an interval of at least two years.

Step 4 - a draft new subject benchmark statement is developed through the subject community working with QAA

40 In cases where the decision has been taken to support the development of a new subject benchmark statement, QAA officers will work with representatives of the subject community in developing a draft statement for consultation or on the revision of an existing statement to incorporate the new subject area. The process will be consistent with the principles set out under the nature of subject benchmark statements (see paragraphs 9-13) and will be informed by guidelines produced by QAA and made available to support the work. The initial stage of the process will be to establish a representative group (the 'benchmarking group') drawn from, and acting on behalf of, the subject community, which will undertake the majority of drafting.

41 Membership of the benchmarking group should be balanced, as far as possible, in respect of the four countries of the UK, different types of providers, different methods of programme delivery and different subject specialism. Membership should include representatives of the principal subject association(s) and/or network(s) as appropriate to the subject area. The subject community may choose to include representation from industry or an employer group, a PSRB and/or from the student body or an organisation representing the interests of students in the subject area. The benchmarking group will need to consult with the subject community, including PSRBs, and the subject's stakeholders so that the statement and standards are acceptable to them and are fit for purpose. The benchmarking group should ensure (through its own work and via the consultation process referred to in step 5 below) that there is congruence between the academic standards described in the proposed subject benchmark statement and the qualification descriptor.

Step 5 - QAA will run a sector-wide consultation

42 Once a draft statement has been approved by QAA for consultation, the agency will organise a sector-wide consultation to enable members of the wider subject community, including higher education providers and other stakeholders, to comment. Stakeholders in this context may include employer representatives, organisations representing the interests of students, academic support organisations and higher education funders. Comments received on the draft statement as part of the consultation will be considered by the benchmarking group prior to a final draft being produced for publication. Once QAA has approved a final draft for publication, it will undertake all copy editing and will be responsible for publication, dissemination and publicity.

43 The typical timescale from receipt of an initial proposal by QAA to publication of a new subject benchmark statement is around 18 months. Once a statement has been published, it will be helpful for QAA and representatives of the subject community to remain in contact in order to discuss any new or impending developments that may affect the currency, status or use of the statement.

Timing

44 QAA will receive expressions of interest and formal proposals for the development of new subject benchmark statements at any time. However, where proposals require discussion by the Quality Code Steering Group, this will take place at their meetings in September and January. The initial discussion between QAA and the proposing body (outlined in Step 1) will include consideration of timescales which would therefore need to be met to enable this.

Financial support

45 QAA will provide funding to cover the cost of holding face-to-face meetings of the benchmarking group, including members' travel and subsistence costs and, in exceptional circumstances, the cost of venue hire. A QAA officer will be assigned to support the subject community in developing the new statement, but QAA does not provide a secretariat to benchmarking groups. All costs associated with preparing draft statements for consultation, publication and dissemination will be covered by QAA. The nature and extent of financial support available for the process of developing a new statement will be discussed in detail when a proposal has been evaluated and a decision taken to proceed.

The review of published subject benchmark statements

46 QAA will initiate a review of new subject benchmark statements not later than five years after their original publication. Subject benchmark statements that have already been reviewed once will normally be reviewed again after seven years. The subject community may initiate a review sooner than five years (or seven years in the case of previously-revised statements) by contacting QAA and outlining its reasons for wanting to revise the statement. The review and revision of existing statements is guided by the following principles.

- Proposals evaluated under the Recognition scheme may prompt the review of an existing statement in order to allow for the incorporation of new subjects.
- There may be minor areas for updating that QAA itself identifies, largely involving changes to terminology, format and style, which will be brought to the attention of the subject community.
- The review process may result in the generation of new statements where a discipline has evolved or matured to the point of requiring a separate statement or statements.
- Review will not necessarily result in changes to the statement by the subject community.
- Review should, where appropriate, align with the review or redevelopment of accreditation documents or other reference points produced by organisations other than QAA where these are reflected in the original statement.
- The process will be based on peer review.

47 At the start of a review, QAA will invite the subject association or network that took the lead and liaised with other bodies in establishing the membership of the original benchmarking group to submit a response on the nature and extent of any revision thought necessary to maintain the currency of the statement. The views of additional bodies, including other subject associations, subject networks, or PSRBs, which may or may not have been directly involved in the drafting of the original statement, will also be invited. A shared view on whether revision is necessary will then be reached through QAA liaising with the subject community, in consultation with the Quality Code Steering Group as appropriate. There may also be minor areas for updating that QAA itself identifies, involving changes to terminology, format and style, as indicated above.

48 Should the subject community feel that changes are not necessary and that the statement remains current and valid, QAA will work directly with a designated subject association or network to undertake any minor changes identified as a result of its own evaluation. Such changes will not be associated with the content of the statement, rather they would reflect the matters identified in the second bullet point, above.

49 Should the subject community identify a need for a more detailed revision, QAA will request that a representative review group is convened under the coordination of a designated

subject association or network. The process of establishing the review group will be similar to that outlined for the recognition process (see paragraphs 40-41). A QAA officer will be assigned to work with the review group in undertaking re-drafting and QAA will provide financial support for the review process as outlined for the recognition process.

50 Draft revised statements will be subject to wider consultation as outlined for the recognition process (see paragraph 42).

51 Factual updates to subject benchmark statements will be handled according to the Protocol for revisions to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.⁸

⁸ www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Protocol-for-revisions-to-the-Quality-Code.aspx

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