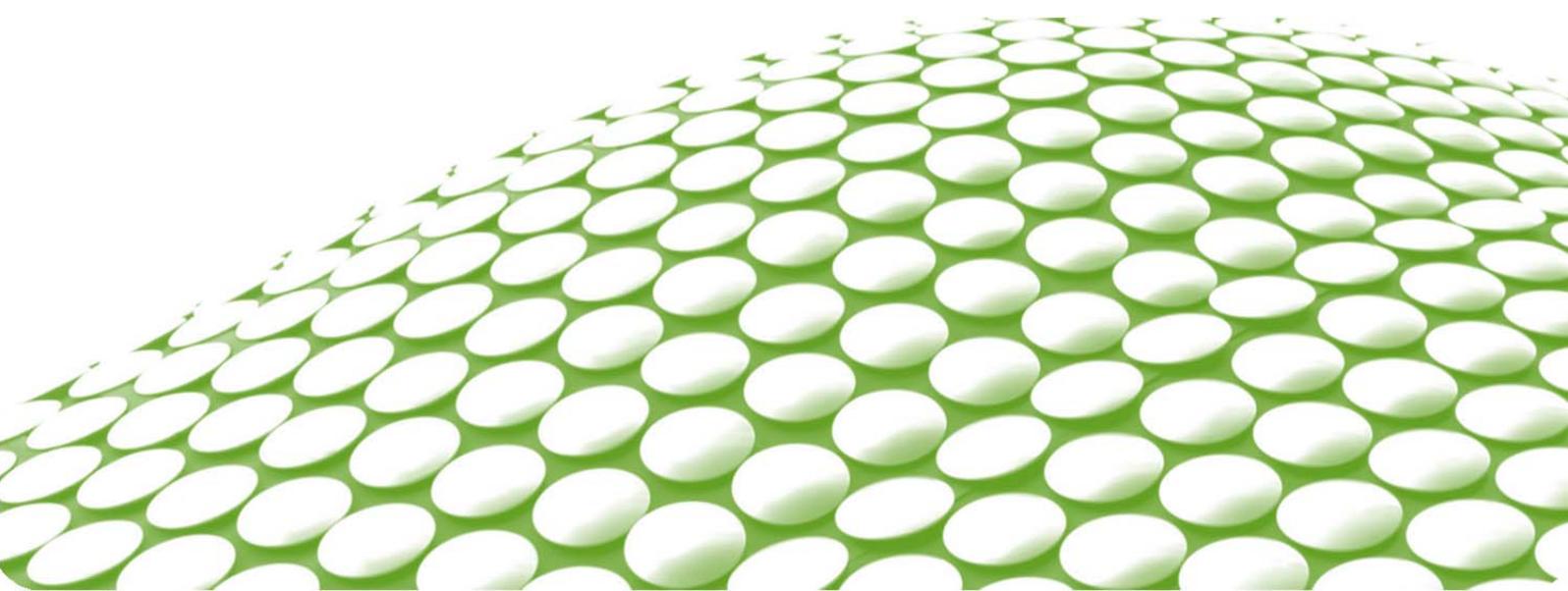


# What is a Course\*?



\*or Programme or Route or Pathway or  
Learning Opportunity...

JISC

**HESA**  
HIGHER EDUCATION  
STATISTICS AGENCY

## What is a Course?

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Course is one of the most widely used words in Higher Education - by students, higher education providers, policy-makers and funders - and as the funding and structures of higher education change, there is an increasing demand for information at the level of individual courses.

This brief report considers the variety of interpretations and models that exist across the sector. It analyses how the concept of a course is represented in various sector-level information systems and specifications and how the definition of course changes across the higher education lifecycle.

## Summary

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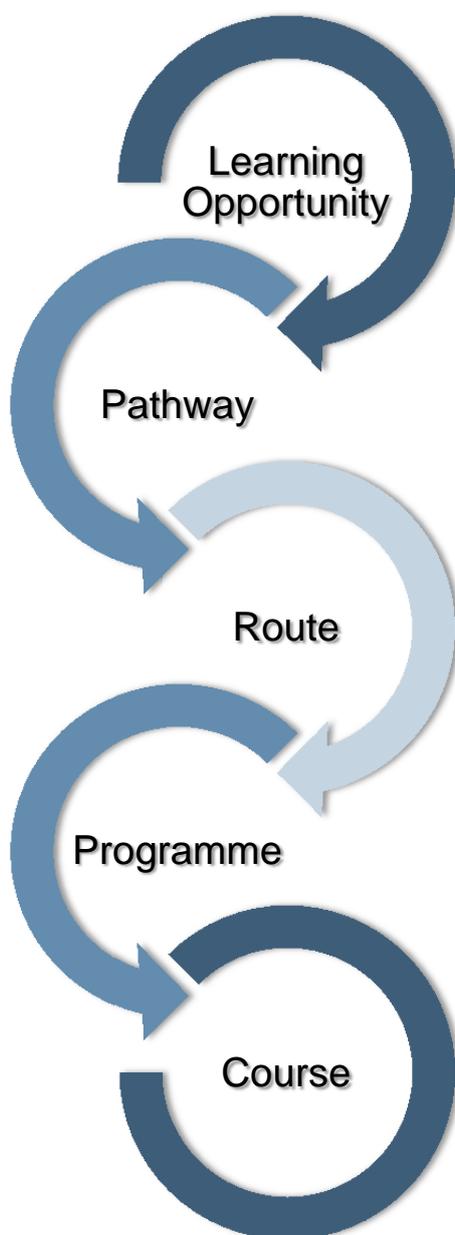
- There is no standard **course** lexicon across the sector and **course** structures can vary enormously between higher education providers; academic regulations at each provider will define words like **course** and programme for that provider and comparisons between course offerings at different providers can be difficult,
- The concept of what a **course** is can vary across the higher education lifecycle, from course design to graduation and alumni,
- The relationship between the **course** a student applies to and the **course** they end up graduating from can vary due to flexibility within a **course** structure and the ability to transfer between courses,
- The word **course** is used extensively - though not exclusively - in sector-level data systems and higher education providers can represent their courses in different ways across these different systems,
- Comparisons between sector-level systems and the information that they generate can be problematic due to differences in definitions and the ways in which the concept of a **course** can change across the higher education lifecycle.

## Introduction

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Although just about everybody uses it, there is no standard definition of the word Course in UK higher education. Higher education providers use a variety of words to describe the broad concept of 'what a student studies' and, although many of the sector-level data systems use the word, there can be subtle yet significant differences in what it means.

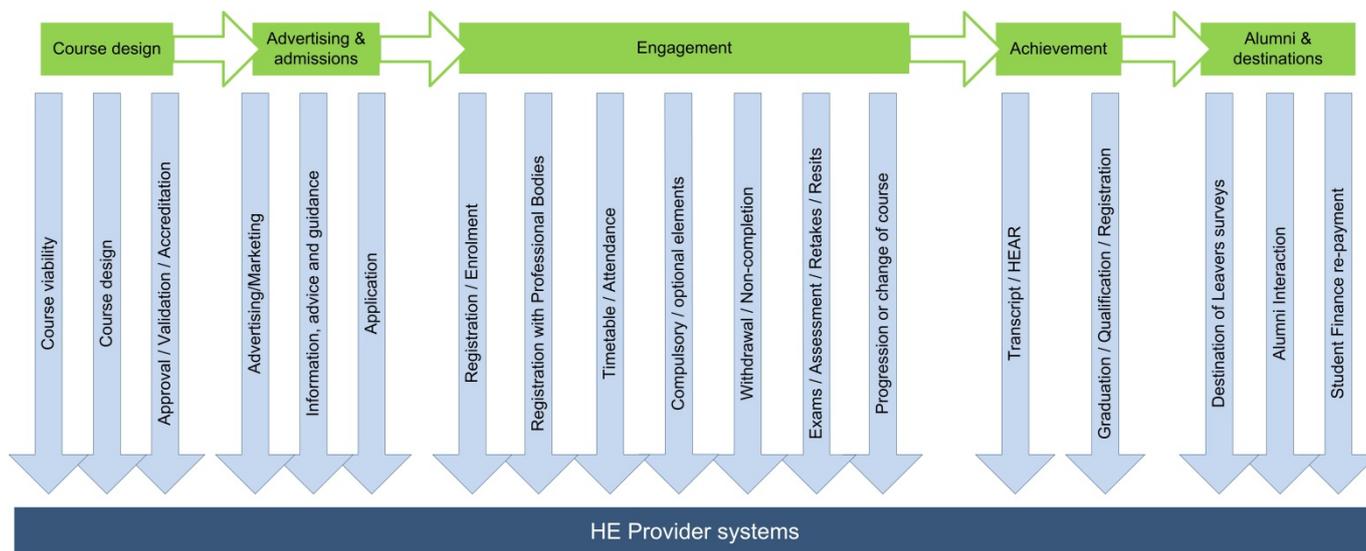
The definition of a **course** is usually driven by the academic regulations and structures of a provider and different providers use different lexicons in defining and describing these structures.



# The Higher Education Lifecycle

Before considering the course concept itself, we should consider the types of activity that make up the higher education lifecycle. These can be split into five main areas as summarised in the diagram below.

## The Higher Education Lifecycle



Course design is the creation and assembly of academic curriculum. It defines learning aims and outcomes, includes validation and accreditation and could also include an analysis of financial and organisational viability. From this perspective we can think of a course as **a coherent academic engagement with a defined set of learning outcomes**.

A course (or at least, an occurrence of a course) can then be advertised and students can apply. This would include promoting the course through prospectus, website and other channels and passing details of the course to aggregators and information/advice/guidance (IAG) services like the UCAS course database. From this perspective we can think of a course as **something you can apply to**.

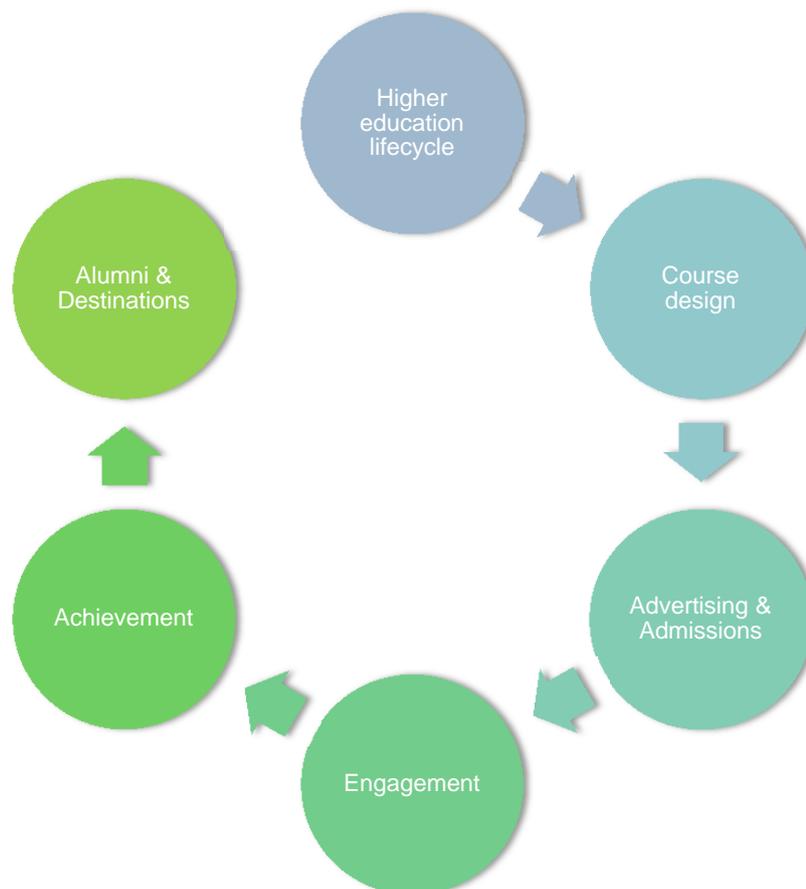
The student registers with the provider and in doing so states an intention to work towards a defined outcome. The student undertakes a diet of study and assessment which might involve both compulsory and optional elements. The student may have the opportunity to change the outcome they are aiming towards; maybe a change of qualification or subject specialism. At this stage we can think of a course as **a student's individual engagement and experience** or, from the perspective of the higher education provider, **the aggregation of required and optional module curricula**.

After the study and assessment a student is awarded a qualification or credit that can be counted towards a qualification. This award represents the achievement of the learning outcomes defined in the course design but also reflects the student's individual engagement with the provider. From this perspective we can think of a course as **the thing that led to the student's qualification**.

Once in receipt of an academic award, the student's specific engagement with the provider might end but a relationship can continue through alumni networks and things like the destinations survey. The student might also continue to make repayments against their student loan. At this stage the student's **experience and achievement on the course can be reflected in increased life opportunities and skills.**

## The relationship between the different stages of a lifecycle

For many higher education providers, the relationship between the course that a student applies to and the qualification the student finally achieves is not simple. Flexibility in this relationship can work in a number of different ways.



## The relationship between application and study

Higher education providers can adopt different definitions of course for different stages of the lifecycle. The most obvious case would be where a number of different application courses take the students to a single course structure for their study which in turn might lead to a number of different potential qualification outcomes.

In some cases, a large number of entry points can lead students to a common core of modules with the option to specialise in any one of a number of areas. In this model students often end up working towards a qualification that is different from the one that they originally applied to.

## Subject flexibility within a course structure

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Some higher education providers offer course structures that provide significant levels of flexibility around the subjects that a student studies. A student can progress through a course selecting modules that allow them to specialise in one or two subject areas and leave with a qualification in a subject (or combination of subjects) that reflects their own pattern of study.

## Qualification flexibility within a course structure

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It is often the case that course structures provide for the option of a student stepping-off of their course early with a lower level qualification than they originally registered for (e.g. a student leaving a masters course with a postgraduate diploma) or extending their studies to aim for a higher qualification (e.g. a student who registered for an HND goes on to a bachelor's degree).

## Change of course

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Sometimes a student's desire to change their qualification or subject goes beyond the flexibility offered in the course structure. In these cases a student might request a change of course at their higher education provider and, subject to some assessment of suitability, the student would move onto a different course at the provider.

## How many students change course?

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The extent of the disconnection between the courses students apply to and the courses they end up qualifying from is very difficult to measure. Varying amounts of flexibility within course structures mean that something considered a course change at one higher education provider could be seen as an acceptable pathway through a course structure at another provider. A provider that operates a very rigid or detailed course structure would count far more course changes than another provider that operates a more flexible structure. During the research for this study providers quoted course change rates of between 10% and 20% of their student population each year. One provider that restructured its course data saw its course change rate move from 1,350 students per year (when it managed courses at a broad, flexible level) to 2,250 students per year (when the internal course definitions were more detailed and numerous).



## Course lexicons and structures

Higher Education is a diverse sector made up of autonomous providers; there is a broad range of approaches to the definition of academic regulations and the words used to describe course structures and concepts. There are also differences in terminology across the range of commercially-available student records systems and the mismatch between the lexicon of the academic regulations and the lexicon of the student records system can be a problem. Some providers have very precisely defined (and published) lexicons while others find that different terms and phrases are used in different parts of the organisation to describe the same concepts. One provider mentioned the difficulty that the implementation of a new student records system caused, simply because a system that used to deal with Courses and Modules was replaced with a system that dealt with Programmes and Courses.

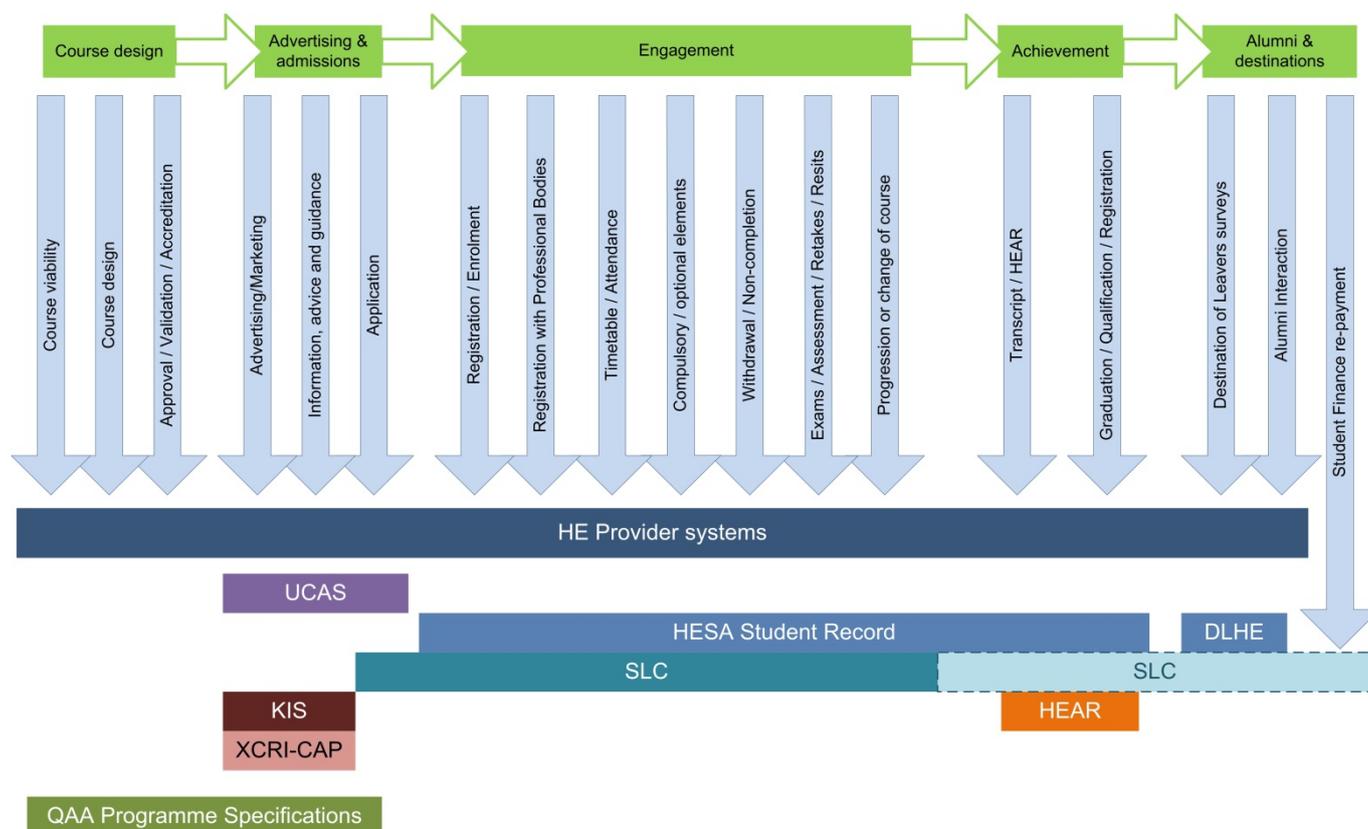
In all of the providers surveyed for this study, there is a broadly common model of a student registering on a **thing** that is made up of **components** (which might include **sub-components**) and which is defined by some sort of **outcome**. Examples of the models and terminology include:

- A student registers on a **course** made up of compulsory **modules** and optional **modules** that leads to the award of a qualification.
- A student registers on a **programme** made up of compulsory **modules** and optional **modules** that leads to the award of a qualification.
- A student registers on a **programme** that is made up of **courses** that are made up of compulsory **modules** and optional **modules** that leads to the award of a qualification.
- A student registers on a **programme** and selects a **route** of compulsory **modules** and optional **modules** that leads to the award of a qualification.
- A student registers on a **programme** made up of compulsory **courses** and optional **courses** that leads to the award of a qualification.
- A student registers on a **course** that awards credit that can be counted towards a qualification.
- A student registers on a **programme** made up of compulsory and optional papers and that leads to the award of a qualification.

## Sector-level information systems and specifications

In a sector of autonomous higher education providers, differences in course structures and lexicons can be thought of as a natural part of the landscape and something that reflects the diversity and independence of the sector. However, providers interact with a number of different sector-level data systems and specifications that work at different stages of the higher education lifecycle. These specifications often include something that looks like a course and might even be called course. The diagram below sets out some of the main sector-level data systems and specifications and shows their position in the broader higher education lifecycle.

### The Higher Education Lifecycle – sector-level systems and specifications



### Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)

<http://www.ucas.ac.uk>

UCAS operate a number of admissions schemes, the main one being a scheme for admissions to full-time undergraduate courses throughout the UK. The UCAS schemes utilise a database that contains course data that is submitted by higher education providers. UCAS systems are based around the concept of a course being something you apply to and providers have the freedom to define course in their UCAS data within commonly agreed and established parameters.

UCAS use the Joint Academic Classification System (JACS) to code the subject of a course. UCAS also differentiate between different awards (degree, HND) in the main scheme. The UCAS process deals with **applicants** who make **applications** and become **accepted applicants**. UCAS publishes statistics covering these three counts.

At the time of writing, UCAS are implementing a new course database to support their operations. The new courses database will be based on the concept of a **programme of study** (defined in terms of content and learning outcome) and a **course** which is a single presentation (or offering) of a **programme of study**.

### Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

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<http://www.hesa.ac.uk>

HESA collects a Student record that covers the engagement and achievement stages of the higher education lifecycle. The record includes a course entity that is defined **as a combination of subject and qualification that defines what a student is aiming for**. Higher education institutions have the freedom to interpret that definition in whatever way is meaningful to them. The course entity includes attributes of course aim (which covers about 150 different qualifications) and JACS subject codes, which are defined by the provider (unlike UCAS which allocates JACS codes based on a course description submitted by the provider).

The Student record is an individualised record and is collected annually. It is possible to link records across years in order to analyse progression and completion but the scope that higher education institutions have to interpret the course definition means that analysis of course changes is compromised by the different ways in which course can be defined in the HESA data.

The Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Institutions (DLHE) record is a supplement to the main Student record and collects information about activities after graduation, including employment and further study. DLHE is also collected at an individual level and the data can be linked to the main Student record in order to analyse destinations data by student and course attributes.

### eXchange of Course Related Information - Course Advertising Profile (XCRI-CAP)

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<http://www.xcri.org>

XCRI-CAP is a data standard for the sharing of course advertising information. The data specification is structured vocabulary of sub-terms used to describe different aspects of a course and acts as a container for the kind of descriptive text that one might find in a prospectus. By generating an XCRI-CAP data feed, providers can allow their course information to be consumed by other web sites and systems.

The XCRI-CAP specification does not define the term **course** but its position in the higher education lifecycle fits with the concept of a course being something you apply to.

XCRI-CAP is a part of a larger initiative called XCRI. Although XCRI has not produced a universal data specification for all course information it has published some analysis of the course information lifecycle.

Metadata for Learning Opportunities (MLO) is a European standard adopted as British Standard (BS EN 15982) that represents a common subset of existing specifications from across Europe, including the XCRI-CAP. Work is underway in the British Standards Institute to create a BS (BS 8581) based on those parts of XCRI-CAP that are not included in MLO.

## Key Information Set (KIS)

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<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/infohe/kis.htm>

The KIS is a comparable set of standardised information about an undergraduate course. It is designed to meet the information needs of prospective students and will be published 'in context' on the websites of universities and colleges.

The development of the KIS has been overseen by the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG) and the aim of the KIS is to provide a comparable set of information that students have identified as useful. These areas are:

- student satisfaction,
- course information,
- employment and salary data,
- accommodation costs,
- financial information, such as fees,
- students' union information.

The KIS will be generated by linking data from higher education providers with the HESA Student and DLHE records, the National Student Survey (NSS) and the UCAS courses database. To facilitate this providers will need to create a mapping that links these different databases together, a task that requires linking data across the length of the higher education lifecycle and becomes all the more difficult since some of the data is based on courses that ran in the past (e.g. NSS and DLHE) and some is about courses that will run in the future.

The KIS technical documentation defines a course as **a programme of study that a student can apply to** though if there is not enough data to be statistically reliable, the KIS will be calculated at the level of subject instead of course.

## Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Programme Specification Guidance

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<http://www.qaa.ac.uk>

The QAA adopt the word programme and describe the programme specification as a concise description of the intended learning outcomes from a higher education programme, and how these outcomes can be achieved and demonstrated. This followed a recommendation in the Dearing report (1997) that stressed the importance of clear and explicit information for students so that they can make informed choices.

The QAA define the term programme as a defined curriculum route that leads to a named award. The guidance defines the information that should be included in a programme specification but it is not prescriptive about the structure of the document or the method of publication.

## Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR)

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<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/StudentExperience/Pages/HEAR.aspx>

The HEAR is a means for recording student achievement in higher education and is intended to provide more detailed information about a student's learning and achievement than the traditional degree classification system. The specification of the HEAR incorporates the **European Diploma Supplement** and provides further details of **the nature, level, context and status** of the studies that were completed by the student.

The HEAR specification uses the term **programme** and includes details of the mode of study, the programme requirements and details and grading scheme. These are presented in the HEAR as descriptive text.

A technical specification of the HEAR XML schema can be found at <http://www.xcri.org/wiki/index.php/HEAR>.

## The Student Loans Company (SLC)

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<http://www.slc.co.uk>

The SLC is the body that provides financial services (loans and grants) to students studying at higher education providers throughout the UK and administers the collection of repayments from former students once they are in employment. Although the details of the various loan and grant schemes vary in different parts of the UK, a core element of the SLC process is the concept of an eligible (or "designated") course.

The definitions of courses designated as eligible for support through the SLC are set out in various statutory instruments across the UK government administrations. Typically the designated courses will be defined by referring to attributes such as the qualification that the course leads to, the mode of study and the duration of the course.

Within the SLC systems each course is identified either by a UCAS course code or by an SLC course code. The student loan is made to the student on the course and the administration of the loan during the student's studies refers to the course that the student is on. Attendance monitoring is undertaken throughout the student's studies to ensure that they continue on the designated course and funds can continue to be paid. If the student changes course this should be reported to the SLC by the higher education provider.

## Acknowledgements

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The author is grateful to the higher education providers that gave up their time to describe their course structures, systems and processes. The author is also grateful to the Editorial Board who offered challenges, advice and guidance throughout the study and the drafting of the report.

### Editorial Board

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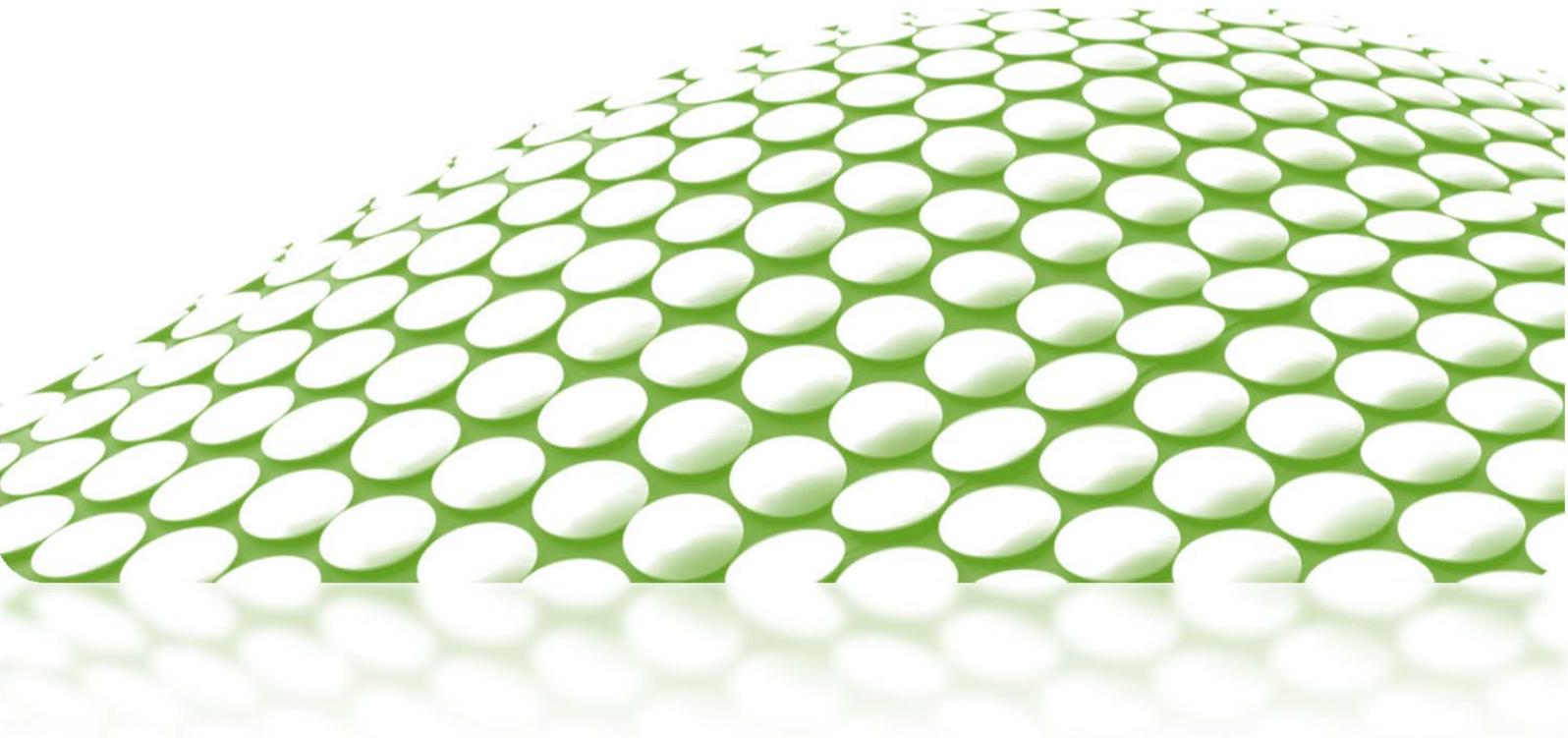
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December 2011

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