QAA

Understanding assessment: its role in safeguarding academic standards and quality in higher education

A guide for early career staff

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Contents

Introduction

The purpose of this guide

The purpose of this guide is to help staff involved in assessment in higher education to use assessment effectively, as a means of maintaining both the **academic standards** of taught awards and ensuring and enhancing the **quality** of the student learning experience. The guide seeks to clarify the role of teaching and administrative staff in ensuring that the assessment process is effective and secure. While the guide is primarily aimed at those at an early stage of their career, it should also provide a useful refresher for more experienced practitioners.

A key function of this document is to promote **sound practice** by drawing attention to the nationally agreed - and sector-owned - expectations, and to encourage **reflective practice** in relation to these. The most relevant of the national expectations is *Section 6* of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*[1] (the *Code of practice*) which is devoted specifically to assessment. A number of the other nine sections of the *Code of practice* also have a bearing on certain aspects of the assessment process. All relevant sections and precepts of the *Code of practice* are signposted throughout the document.

This guide is intended to be helpful irrespective of whether staff are based in a university or college with degree awarding powers, or another institution without such powers, for example a further education college (this relates only to higher education programmes delivered by such colleges). Staff based in the latter will need to factor in the relationship with the awarding institution, and will have been advised by that institution of the extent to which matters relating to assessment are determined by them or by the college.[2]

The guide focuses on assessment in **taught programmes** only. For research degrees, reference should be made to the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research students* and to related publications on doctorates.[3]

What this guide does not do

This guide does **not** tell you which method of assessment to use or how to set an examination paper or mark a piece of coursework. Instead it seeks to explain the implications of the decisions you make relating to assessment at each of the key stages of designing, delivering and reviewing programmes and modules. While these decisions may appear relatively minor, they can actually be very significant, especially to your students.

This guide is not designed simply to expand on, or rewrite, the expectations set out in the *Code of practice*, *Section 6*, or elsewhere. The *Code of practice* is (intentionally) a formal document primarily addressed to institutions, and the expectations it contains have been considered at institutional level and addressed in institutional regulations or procedures.

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[1] The 10 sections of the *Code of practice* are available on the QAA website, at www.qaa.ac.uk/ AssuringStandardsAndQuality/code-of-practice.

[2] *Code of practice, Section 2* is relevant in such cases as it applies to all forms of collaborative arrangement.

[3] See www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/doctoral.

You are therefore most likely to have encountered the *Code of practice* through your institution's regulations, which might draw out the expectations of direct relevance to you, as well as setting out the extent to which they are rules you must follow, or boundaries within which you and colleagues have discretion to make certain decisions.[4] **This guide does not, therefore, replace such regulations** - it must be read and understood in the context of the institution in which you are working - but it should help you better to link them to your academic role at programme/module level.

How this guide was prepared

This guide has been written by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the body with UK-wide responsibility for overseeing the standards and quality of academic awards made by higher education institutions (HEIs) and for safeguarding the public interest in higher education. It has been produced in consultation with practitioners and with the Higher Education Academy (HEA), incorporating early feedback from three events hosted by QAA jointly with institutions during 2010. The three events affirmed QAA's view that there is value in producing a QAA guide primarily aimed at staff in the early stages of their careers. Care has been taken to complement the HEA's work to develop resources on assessment and feedback.[5] HEA's focus is on the pedagogy of assessment, while that of QAA is on the implications for academic standards and quality.

How to use this guide

Our assumption is that the guide will be used primarily as a resource that you will dip in and out of as relevant, rather than reading from cover to cover. To facilitate this way of using it, the document's contents are structured broadly to reflect the 'lifecycle' of the assessment process - emphasising that designing assessment comes first rather than last.[6] The guide should provide you with prompts enabling you to follow up on specific points as appropriate, for example where your institution's regulations and procedures may provide you with more guidance, or where further reading is available.

QAA terminology

In this guide we talk about 'academic standards' and 'academic quality', which are the two key terms used throughout the *Code of practice* and also in QAA's institutional review methods (for more detail on reviews see the 'Monitoring and reviewing arrangements for assessment' section). When using these terms we use the following definitions:[7]

Academic standards are the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award. For equivalent awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK.

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[4]   *Code of practice, Section 6*, Precept 10 requires that: 'Institutions ensure that everyone involved in the assessment of students is competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities' (p 22).

[5]   www.heacademy.ac.uk.

[6]   We recognise there can always be healthy debate about the order of certain matters and that in practice different stages are going on in parallel, such as marking one piece of work while providing feedback on another.

[7]   Definitions as detailed in *Changes to the Academic Infrastructure: Final report*, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/changes-to-academic-infrastructure.aspx.

Academic quality is how well learning opportunities[8] made available to students enable them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided for them.

National reference points: the 'Academic Infrastructure'

The *Code of practice* referred to throughout this guide forms part of a wider set of UK-wide reference points currently known as the Academic Infrastructure, which is published by QAA on behalf of the higher education sector. The Academic Infrastructure comprises, in addition to the *Code of practice*, the frameworks for higher education qualifications, subject benchmark statements and guidance on programme specifications. It is currently being redeveloped following extensive public consultation and is being migrated into what will become known (from December 2011) as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. This change will not involve fundamental changes to the content of the expectations it sets out, although each component will be reviewed between 2011 and 2013.[9]

Academic staff tend to need to be most familiar with the appropriate qualifications framework and the subject benchmark statements (provided that one or more statement is applicable to the subject(s) in question). Each institution provides guidance for its staff on how these components feature at key stages of programme development, monitoring and review.

Introducing assessment

Defining assessment

There is no generally agreed definition of assessment. For the purposes of the *Code of practice*, QAA defines it as 'any processes that appraise an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills.'[10] The American Association for Higher Education offers a more extensive definition:

> Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education. (Angelo, 1995, p 7)

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[8]   In Scotland the phrase 'student learning experience' is used in place of 'learning opportunities'. A key principle of UK higher education is that institutions are responsible for providing opportunities for students to achieve the required standards, students themselves are responsible for making the best use of those opportunities, including through private study.

[9]   See www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/changes-to-academic-infrastructure.aspx.

[10] *Code of practice, Section 6*, p 4.

Distinguishing formative and summative assessment

Assessment is usually subdivided into two categories, often known as summative assessment and formative assessment. These are defined in the *Code of practice, Section 6* (pp 35 and 36) as follows:

> **Formative assessment** has a developmental purpose and is designed to help learners learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance and on how it can be improved and/or maintained. Reflective practice by students sometimes contributes to formative assessment.

> **Summative assessment** is used to indicate the extent of a learner's success in meeting the assessment criteria used to gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme.[11]

These definitions are not exhaustive. As indicated below feedback is not exclusive to formative assessment; summative assessment should also be capable of promoting student learning.

In the remainder of this document, unless stated otherwise, the term assessment should be understood as referring to summative assessment, though many of the ideas can be applied also to formative assessment.

Purposes of assessment

Assessment serves a number of purposes. The main purpose of summative assessment is to measure student learning in a way that recognises it through the award of credits or equivalent (the combination of which can then lead to a named qualification).

However, of equal importance is the recognition that assessment should also be an integral part of learning, or that summative as well as formative assessment can, and does, facilitate student learning.[12] This is reflected in the *Code of practice, Section 6*, which requires that: 'Institutions encourage assessment practice that promotes effective learning' (p 9).

Beyond this, the importance of the purpose of assessment may differ according to circumstances.

For the student, individual pieces of assessment provide a source of motivation for study; they promote learning by providing feedback on performance and help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

For the lecturer, assessment provides an opportunity to evaluate the knowledge, understanding, ability and skills attained by different students. The overall profile of student performance offers useful information for assessing the effectiveness of course[13] content and teaching methods, thereby facilitating improvement.

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[11] A simpler way of expressing this distinction is that in summative assessment the marks awarded for the assessment count towards the final mark of the module/programme/award.

[12] A number of practitioners focus on the notion of 'assessment for learning' to emphasise and explain the importance of this aspect of assessment. See for example the work of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Assessment for Learning at the University of Northumbria www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/central/ar/lteia/cetl_afl/; and the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) at Oxford Brookes University, www.brookes.ac.uk/aske.

[13] In this document, the term 'course' is used interchangeably with 'programme' to refer to the programme of study that a student applies for (which may itself be made up of smaller units).

For the institution, assessment provides information upon which decisions as to students' progression and the receipt of awards may be based. The assessment process enables the institution to ensure that appropriate standards are being met, in accordance with nationally agreed frameworks, such as subject benchmark statements and the frameworks for higher education qualifications. Information generated by assessment, such as mark or grade distributions, forms a valuable tool for quality assurance and enhancement.

Other stakeholders also have an interest in the assessment process. Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) may use assessment outcomes to award professional accreditation and/or 'fitness to practise' status (see 'Meeting the requirements of PSRBs' in the 'Assessment in course design' section for more information'). Employers use an individual's assessment record as a means of assessing their educational achievements and suitability for employment.

Fundamental principles of assessment

Two sets of principles are fundamental to good assessment practice. These principles are set out in the *Code of practice, Section 6*, will be reflected in institutional regulations and procedures, and should be evident in day-to-day assessment practice.

Validity and reliability

The *Code of practice, Section 6*, Precept 2, requires that: 'Institutions publicise and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable'.

An assessment process cannot be effective in promoting student learning unless it is valid and reliable. Precept 2 emphasises that the process of assessment must be designed and carried out in such a way that it is effective in enabling students to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes (or the extent of that achievement), in relation to both subject-specific and generic skills and knowledge. Equally, policies and assessment criteria must be applied properly and consistently.

Assessment is understood to be valid when it is testing precisely what the examiners want to test, bearing in mind the learning outcomes for the module. An extreme example being that a written examination cannot enable a student to demonstrate that they have mastered a practical skill. A written examination might also be invalid where it encourages students to regurgitate material rather than to critically analyse or apply material learned to solve problems. Reliability in this context essentially means that, as far as possible, markers acting independently of each other but using the same assessment criteria would reach the same judgement on a piece of work.[14]

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[14] See the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development Assessment resources at www.brookes.ac.uk/ services/ocsld/resources/assessment.html. The section on 'Principles of assessment' emphasises that 'whilst [...] complete objectivity is impossible to achieve, when it comes to summative assessment it is a goal worth aiming for'.

Rigour, probity and fairness

The *Code of practice, Section 6*, Precept 5 requires that: 'Institutions ensure that assessment is conducted with rigour, probity and fairness with due regard for security'.

The need to ensure that the assessment process is sound and that it is fair is closely allied to the need for validity and reliability highlighted above. In particular this means ensuring that all students are treated equitably, and that they are all given equivalent opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of the required standards. Much of this is concerned with the institution putting in place procedures to address special circumstances (see the 'Mitigating or exceptional circumstances' and 'Disabled students' sections). It is the responsibility of academic staff to ensure these policies are implemented consistently and to provide clear and accurate advice to students who might need to access those policies.

Assessment in course design

Building assessment into the course design process

As a member of a programme/module team you will be involved in designing, or reviewing the design of, a programme or modules within it. The need to build an overall assessment strategy into the design of a programme cannot be too strongly emphasised.[15] One approach is to consider the following model, setting out three stages of programme/module design:

>	**Stage 1**: Decide on the intended learning outcomes. What should the students be able to do on completion of the course (and what underpinning knowledge and understanding will they need in order to do it) that they could not do when they started?

>	**Stage 2**: Devise the assessment task(s). If you have written precise learning outcomes this should be easy because the assessment should be whether or not they can satisfactorily demonstrate achievement of the outcomes.

>	**Stage 3**: Devise the learning activities necessary (including formative assessment tasks) to enable the students to satisfactorily undertake the assessment task(s). These stages should be conducted iteratively, with each stage informing the others to ensure coherence.

The likelihood that more than one iteration might occur reflects the need to ensure what is sometimes referred to as 'alignment' between the learning outcomes at programme level and those at module level; in other words to ensure that the learning outcomes at programme level are actually being addressed through the combination of modules.[16]

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[15]	See for example 'Purposes and Principles of Assessment' published by Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development at www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsld/resources/assessment.html, and Biggs et al (2007).

[16]	A number of practitioners focus on the need to develop an 'integrative' approach to assessment, balancing and aligning all the key elements of the assessment process; see for example outputs from the Scottish Enhancement Theme on this subject, in particular: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/publications/default. asp#Integrative.

The section of the *Code of practice* covering programme design and approval details some questions that you may wish to consider as part of this process (see box).

> **Programme[17] design and approval sample questions**
>
> Taken from the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review* - Appendix 3.
>
> • Does the assessment process enable learners to demonstrate achievement of all the intended learning outcomes?
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> • Are there criteria that enable internal and external examiners to distinguish between different categories of achievement?
>
> • Can there be full confidence in the security and integrity of assessment procedures?
>
> • Does the assessment strategy have an adequate formative function in developing student abilities?
>
> • What evidence is there that the standards achieved by learners meet the minimum expectations for the award, as measured against relevant subject benchmark statements and qualification frameworks?

Your institution's procedures are likely to include expectations or guidance on course design which take account of issues relating to assessment and its fit with the learning outcomes. One approach is the use of a grid through which you are asked to indicate how assessment methods map to the stated learning outcomes. This can be an effective way of demonstrating that the choice of method is appropriate for each outcome being assessed - although it may not demonstrate that the method chosen is the most appropriate method.

Choosing the methods of assessment

It is likely, at the design stage, that you will need to consider, and make a choice between, methods of assessment. You will need to be clear first about how much choice is available to you within institutional limits (and PSRB limits if applicable). There may be restrictions or general principles to bear in mind such as:

• the preference for using more than one assessment method (unless there is a compelling reason to only use one)

• the need to ensure that students have opportunities for formative assessment in a method that is being experienced for the first time in the programme.

The 'traditional' vehicles for the assessment of students' achievement have been essays and examinations, with practical examinations in areas such as the sciences. However, a much greater range of assessment modes is now being employed.[18]

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[17] Note that the same principles apply to the design of individual modules, whether these form part of a programme or are 'stand alone'.

[18] There are extensive sources giving information about assessment methods, some of which are discipline based, others are more generic. The following are valuable starting points: Bloxham, S and Boyd, P (2007) and the HEA's extensive resources at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/assessment/assessment-resources. See also the sections below on assessment criteria and marking which are relevant to the issue of assessment methods.

Agreeing the amount and timing of assessment

The amount and timing of assessment are important considerations in ensuring fairness (as discussed under 'Fundamental principles of assessment' in the 'Introducing assessment' section). These must be addressed at the design stage and need to be considered both within the individual modules and across the whole programme (taking into account the combination of subjects in a two or three-subject programme). This ensures that students feel they are able to bring their best efforts to bear on the assessment tasks and that treatment within and across programmes and disciplines is equitable.

The amount of assessment embraces both the number of tasks within the module (and across the programme) and the size of those tasks. Decisions of this kind are significantly influenced by the nature of the discipline, and there may be expectations laid down by the relevant PSRB for externally accredited programmes as well as by your institution (see 'Meeting the requirements of PSRBs' in the 'Assessment in course design' section for further details). However, the specific intended learning outcomes that are being measured remain central. Not every outcome has to be explicitly assessed in every task, but students should generally have more than one opportunity to demonstrate the achievement of an outcome.

Decisions about the amount of assessment need to take into account the overall workload for the student in the module/programme. A 20-credit module indicates a notional student learning time of 200 hours which includes all teaching activities, any private study, and all aspects of preparing for and completing the assessment tasks. Students will reflect on what they perceive to be the fairness or otherwise of the workload placed on them and will make comparisons across modules and with their peers on programmes in other disciplines.[19]

On the timing of assessment tasks, a key factor for students is whether tasks are evenly spread across all their modules, allowing sufficient time to prepare for and complete each task. As indicated below, timing is also critical in ensuring that students can receive feedback and can act on that feedback. Taking a view across the whole of a year or stage therefore helps in recognising where the pressure points will be, and in thinking about how much time there is for students to assimilate learning from lectures, practicals and so on, and the relevant reading.

Agreeing the weighting of assessment tasks

The weighting of assessment tasks has a bearing on the validity of the assessment process - that is, whether student learning is being measured effectively. It affects how the overall performance in the module is judged. For example, if there are two assessment methods employed are they weighted 50:50 in terms of the final mark for the module or in some other proportion? Is one of more importance than the other, either in terms of the size of the tasks (as above) or their significance in terms of which learning outcomes are being measured?

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[19] QAA has published guidance for institutions designed to help with explaining the role of contact hours in students' learning. It is accompanied by a guide written specifically for students. http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/contact-hours.aspx.

There is also the question of whether any assessment element must be passed irrespective of the performance in other elements. For example, there may be certain skills in which you require students to demonstrate competence, without which they would be unable to pass the module. This is common in, but not restricted to, programmes in professional disciplines such as medicine, nursing and teaching.

Meeting the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)

In many disciplines, particularly those of a vocational nature such as nursing, engineering or social work, students who successfully complete their degrees will also achieve professional accreditation. This in turn means that the relevant professional body may require that the assessment process meets certain criteria, for example:

- a certain proportion of a student's credit must come from unseen examinations

- a student must have demonstrated particular professional competences - normally referred to as 'professional standards'

- a limit is placed on students' entitlement to resit failed modules.

A note on the language of study and assessment

The vast majority of UK higher education provision is both taught and assessed in English.[20] Where this is not the case, certain considerations must be addressed to ensure that academic standards are not put at risk. Any proposal to involve another language in place of English is likely to require early approval by the awarding institution - some actually prohibit it - so that appropriate arrangements can be considered. It is crucial to ensure that the teaching staff and external examiners allocated to the programme have expertise in the additional language.[21]

Designing the assessment of work-based/placement learning

When designing valid and reliable assessment for work-based/placement learning it is important to consider the extent to which staff from the placement provider or employer will be involved in making or contributing to assessment decisions. This might involve providing feedback to inform the marking, or actually undertaking marking. The *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning* addresses the range of issues applicable in these situations.

As many placements occur in professional programmes, the relevant professional body will have laid down its own expectations regarding the conduct of, and involvement in, assessment. This is likely to be made explicit through the programme approval/accreditation process. Extensive resources are available on the subject of work-based learning, including the HEA's resources.[22]

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[20] Recognising the specific instances of Welsh (under the Welsh Language Act 1993) and foreign language programmes.

[21] Further guidance is available in the *Code of practice, Section 6*, Precept 11.

[22] See www.heacademy.ac.uk/flexible-learning.

Mitigating or exceptional circumstances

How to approach mitigating circumstances

The way in which institutions manage cases where students experience mitigating or exceptional circumstances is significant for ensuring that academic standards are maintained and that students perceive they are being treated fairly. The key to considering such matters lies in being able to make provision for students who experience what can be a wide variety of circumstances, enabling them to demonstrate the required standards without compromising or lowering the academic standards set for the award in question.

Ensuring fairness is about achieving a balance between making special arrangements for the individual student affected by such circumstances, being fair to all students and ensuring, as far as reasonably practicable, consistency between similar cases. This is an area where student perception can be important but problematic. There is a risk that students will perceive that those experiencing mitigating circumstances are being treated inconsistently. Such a perception can be exacerbated when, given the confidentiality of individual cases, students' knowledge of decisions about other students is based on imperfect or second-hand information.

There are two other general principles which you should bear in mind:

- ensuring that students are properly informed of procedures and how to use them, and that time limits are clear. Achieving the former is often complicated because mitigating circumstances are matters that most students don't anticipate needing to know about, especially at the start of their course. Information provided in handbooks/during induction can therefore have very limited impact, and often has to be reinforced through reminders nearer to assessment periods

- the need for confidentiality, in particular in ensuring that staff know what they need to know but, equally, that as few staff as possible are involved in the details of what can be very difficult personal circumstances. It is similarly important to make sure that a student in such circumstances is only required to give details once, in as supportive an environment as possible, with access to relevant specialist support services where appropriate.[23] As a member of staff it is important that you are able to provide accurate advice and are clear about when confidentiality needs to be respected.

Types of circumstances

Broadly mitigating or exceptional circumstances can be placed into three types (your institution might use slightly different terminology):

- **absence**: where a student is unable to sit an assessment scheduled to take place at a published time, and where procedures will be in place to allow students to defer the assessment to a later date

- **extension**: where a student is given a longer period of time to complete an assessment task

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[23]   This principle needs to be borne in mind in particular in the case of students on two subject programmes or programmes involving modules from different departments/disciplines.

- **personal circumstances**: where a student completes the assessment at the scheduled time but believes that his/her performance was adversely affected by personal circumstances, usually medical or similar, such as bereavement.

This section does not attempt to cover other situations such as whether a student may be allowed to repeat the whole or part of a programme, or where an agreed period of absence (sometimes called 'leave of absence' or 'intercalation') applies.

The responsibilities of staff

For a member of staff the key is to know the extent of your responsibility and authority in such matters, as defined in institutional regulations/procedures, and to be able to give students appropriate advice. Giving advice may include referring them to specialist advice services and dealing with cases where the circumstances have placed the student outside the normal progression for the programme. For example, a student may have to defer the following year's study while outstanding assessments are completed, or have to take those assessments during the following year in addition to the assessments for the latter.

Given the importance of such matters for maintaining academic standards, all of the above issues will be governed by institutional regulations and procedures, though practice will vary on the extent to which authority is a matter for individual schools/departments or is a central matter. The relevant board of examiners (for further details see the 'Boards of examiners' section) is likely to have some responsibility, although in practice authority might be delegated to a senior member of staff or a sub-committee. While decisions about personal circumstances can often be considered by a board of examiners, decisions about absences and extensions generally need to be made prior to the deadline for the assessment and therefore cannot wait until the end of the semester/term or year.

A common question for students is that of what evidence they are required to provide and how to deal with circumstances where independent evidence is not available. Evidence needs to be directly relevant. For example, a situation might occur where a student has been ill, but by the time they get to the doctor the illness has practically cleared up. A medical certificate attesting to a condition that the doctor has not seen is of no value. Maintaining the security of academic standards includes ensuring that students do not unfairly gain advantage over other students by being given a 'benefit' for which the need is unproven.

Disabled students

The *Code of practice* includes a specific section on disabled students, which builds on the legal requirements applicable to higher education providers, primarily the *Equality Act 2010*.[24] The section emphasises the need to make reasonable adjustments to meet the individual needs of disabled students, seeking to place such students on an equal footing with their peers in terms of studying and being assessed. This requirement embraces all aspects of being a student, not only adjustments for assessment.

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[24] The *Equality Act 2010* defines disability as a 'physical or mental impairment' where that impairment 'has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal day-to-day activities'. For more information see: http://homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities.

It is important to emphasise that the needs of disabled students are not just matters to be addressed ad hoc in response to individual cases. A body of work has been developed around promoting good practice in programme design, the focus of which is inclusivity - in other words designing assessment methods which can more effectively take account of different student circumstances without the need to make adjustments individually and reactively.[25]

Feedback on assessment

Good practice in feedback

The *Code of practice, Section 6* is explicit about the importance of feedback:

> Institutions provide appropriate and timely feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment (p 20). (See also Precept 3.)

This section aims to demonstrate the role of feedback as a fundamental part of promoting student learning and to indicate some of the issues which can arise in relation to it. It is not intended to tell you how to design your assessment tasks nor how to give feedback,[26] but to identify some of the issues which can inform your thinking.

Summative assessment, as well as formative assessment, should be seen as a vehicle for providing opportunities for learning, therefore in designing assessment tasks consideration should be given to the opportunities which will be provided for students to obtain feedback.

Student perceptions of the effectiveness of the feedback they receive

Feedback to students on assessment is an area that has gained significant attention in recent years, not least through the results of the National Student Survey (NSS). Each year the survey has indicated that this is the area of least satisfaction for students. Although institutions have put increasing effort into addressing concerns, results have not improved notably.[27]

Promoting student learning

The debate about feedback in part demonstrates a lack of shared expectations between staff and students about what constitutes good quality work. This indicates that one of the key elements of the assessment and feedback process is communication which involves discussion of, or explicit reference to, the assessment/grading criteria. This is not about justifying the mark awarded,[28] but about demonstrating explicitly what improvements

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[25] For example http://search.heacademy.ac.uk/kb5/hea/evidencenet/results.page?qt=inclusivity.

[26] There is extensive literature giving practical advice, including: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assessment.

[27] Results for 2010 show a satisfaction rating of 67 per cent - up 2 per cent on the previous year, but 6 per cent short of the next lowest (organisation and management) and 16 per cent short of the rating for 'teaching on my course', www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2010/nssresult.htm. The compilers of the survey urge caution in comparing two years' data because of differences in the profile of students included. Results are usually published in August each year. The results for 2011 are published at www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2011/nss.htm.

[28] This is sometimes a criticism which is made of feedback following summative assessment.

could be made in a way which can be used in future assessment tasks to enable a better performance to be achieved. To quote QAA's most recent *Outcomes* paper on assessment: 'the purpose of feedback [is] not just to evaluate the quality of students' work; feedback should also assist them in showing how to improve that quality' (QAA 2008). The provision of exemplar assignments or model answers can help reinforce feedback.

Price et al (2011) have argued that the effectiveness of feedback is difficult to judge, that students are the best judges but that they may not always recognise the benefits. The term 'feedforward' is increasingly being used to emphasise the learning focus of feedback.

A report on integrative assessment referred to this as a 'recursive cycle, or feedback loop... in which feedback comments on one task, draft or set of questions can be fed directly into a subsequent task or draft, or will aid preparation for an exam...Students therefore have the opportunity for 'low-stakes' practice on assessable work, and to benefit directly from the feedback in a way that can also contribute to a subsequent formal mark or grade...' (QAA, 2007).[29]

Another aspect of designing feedback is to consider ways in which it can be a two-way conversation, rather than a one-way process from tutor to student, enabling clarification of the feedback and increasing understanding.[30]

Opinion is divided on the extent to which feedback should focus on intended learning outcomes. For example, one approach is to include each of the intended learning outcomes for the assessment task on a feedback pro forma, enabling the marker to indicate whether the individual outcome has been achieved, and - where performance is above that minimum level - the extent to which, or the way in which, it has been achieved. Others favour a more holistic approach. It is for the individual institution to decide which is the most appropriate, in consultation with students. Given students' differing perceptions of what constitutes feedback, an ongoing conversation with them might be rewarding for staff and students.

Timing and timeliness

Increasingly there appears to be a debate about the timing of feedback - in part prompted by the NSS results referred to above. This has led to calls for institutions to agree deadlines such as three weeks for receipt of feedback. While this is important, not least in providing certainty for students and in ensuring that the assessment task is still relatively fresh in the student's mind, it is arguable that timeliness is really about ensuring that the feedback is received when there is sufficient time to reflect on it and decide what improvements can be made while undertaking the next assessment task. Most important here is the need for careful module design, including focusing on the timing of assessment tasks relative to each other (as well as allowing time for the work to be marked).

The issue of timeliness does not mean that an end of module assessment cannot provide learning opportunities, as the feedback may relate to points which are more generic and therefore applicable to tasks which might be undertaken in other modules.

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[29] See also the cycle of learning described by Charlotte Taylor, University of Sydney, www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/ftp/newsletters/bulletin22.pdf.

[30] In other words, a dialogue rather than a monologue. See for example, Nicol, D (2010) and Shute, V J (2008).

Sources and forms of feedback

While the member of staff marking the work might be viewed as the primary source of feedback it is helpful to take a broader approach to designing opportunities for feedback which recognise other valuable sources. Other staff involved in the delivery of the module (this may include employers, clients or patients, particularly where the work involves work-based/placement activity) may be able to contribute, as could peers - especially if there are opportunities for peer assessment through which students comment on each other's work in pairs or groups. Equally, opportunities for self-assessment can be valuable, encouraging students to reflect on their work, a skill which is also useful in the longer term.

Different forms of feedback can also be considered, taking into account the nature and media of the assessed work. For example:

•   the return of the assessed work with written comments

•   the provision of oral feedback, either in addition to or to replace written feedback

•   the provision of feedback one-to-one or on a group/cohort basis.

As indicated above, the provision of exemplar assignments or model answers can also be valuable, especially if they then form the basis for further discussion.

Marking

Approaching marking

Having ensured that the assessment strategy for the programme or module has been designed in a way which is rigorous and consistent with your institution's regulations and/ or procedures, the next consideration is to ensure that marking is carried out in a way that is transparent and fair.[31] A central part of fairness is ensuring that marking is consistent, especially where there are a number of examiners involved.

Your institution will have put in place requirements or guidance on the mechanisms to be used when marking. These might include:

•   a marking scale

•   marking schemes (often called 'grade descriptors')

•   whether anonymous marking is required

•   various forms of second marking

•   the role of the external examiner(s)

•   using quantitative data

•   administrative procedures for recording and verifying marks.

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[31]   *Code of practice, Section 6*, Precept 7. As indicated earlier consistency is also a key part of achieving 'reliability'.

The marking scale

Before starting to mark student work (including formatively assessed work) you need to be clear about what marking scale you are expected to use and to ensure that you are clear about how this is interpreted, so that different examiners all work with it in the same way.[32]

For the majority of institutions the 0-100 scale is used (some use alternatives such as letter grades) but be aware that in a number of subjects there is a tradition of not using the full scale. In mathematics a mark of 90 or even 100 will be achieved, but such a mark is rarely heard of in law or some other subjects, notably in the arts and humanities.

Marking schemes

The nature of any marking scheme or grading criteria will depend on the institution and the tradition within the specific discipline. In some, detailed marking schemes will be appropriate as a way of guiding all examiners. These may take the form of model answers with the marks awarded for each part of the answer indicated. In others, agreement over what is being sought in each answer may be achieved through test-marking of a sample of work by all markers and a discussion based on that test marking.

The challenge for all involved in marking is to reduce the scope for inconsistency as far as practicable when applying the given marking scheme. Processes referred to below, such as second marking, all help to reduce such inconsistency, but as far as possible all those involved in using a marking scheme need to have a shared understanding of it.

Anonymous marking

Anonymous marking is marking where the name of the student is not revealed to the person marking his/her work. Its use is widespread but not universally accepted by either staff or students. In particular there is a tension between the perceived benefits of anonymity and its negative impact on the giving of personalised feedback. Evidence suggests that feedback is more likely to be heeded by the student where the feedback is tailored to the individual student based on the marker's knowledge of that student's progress.

For a number of disciplines the nature of the assessment activity makes anonymous marking impractical (in activities involving performance, for example). In some types of work, such as dissertations, where the student is working on an individually selected theme, it is difficult to mark anonymously, although for the second marker this may not be the case as he/she may not have been involved with the work prior to submission.

As with any aspect of assessment the main issue is the need for clarity and consistency, ensuring that exceptions to the policy are justified and that the justification is understood by staff and students alike. The need for clarity also extends to ensuring that staff and students are clear about when, and in what circumstances, anonymity will be removed. For example, this may be necessary to take into account exceptional circumstances. (See also the 'Boards of examiners' section.)

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[32]   There is a strong body of opinion that the use of numbers to judge the achievement of learning outcomes is inappropriate. In particular see: Rust, C (2011) and Yorke, M (2009).

Second marking

Institutions employ different approaches to second marking in terms of both what their expectations are and precisely how they are expressed. This is an area where practice between disciplines necessarily varies, reflecting differences in the type of assessment task and submission media.

The precise form of second marking will vary, the main possibilities being:

- **open marking** (where the second marker is informed of the first marker's mark before commencing); one form of open marking is check marking (see below)

- **closed/blind marking** (where the second marker is not informed of the first marker's mark)

- **independent/double marking** (each examiner makes a separate judgement and in the event of disagreement a resolution is sought)

- **check marking** (where the second marker determines whether the mark awarded by the first marker is appropriate and confirms it if appropriate).

One factor that may guide the choice of approach to second marking is the volume of student work to be marked. In recent years there has been a significant shift away from the double marking of all student work towards the use of sampling.[33]

Early career staff may find that a higher proportion of their work is second marked. This is because the experience of the marker is a factor that institutions take into account in deciding how much work should be second marked.

You may also encounter the term 'moderation' at some stage. This is used variously in practice. It is not the same as second marking but essentially refers to the arrangements which institutions put in place to ensure consistency of marking, including the proper application of the assessment criteria. This can include rescaling marks based on the consideration of quantitative data, as outlined below, as well as the sampling of scripts by internal and external examiners.

External examining

The role of external examiners has evolved over the past 20 to 30 years, primarily because of the changes in higher education resulting from its so-called 'massification' and diversification (of students and institutions). Rarely do external examiners now act as examiners in the pure sense of marking submitted work; for most institutions the role is now more about moderating through sampling student assessment tasks and output (sometimes referred to as a 'calibrator' role).[34]

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[33] For discussion on the value or otherwise of second marking compared with single marking see for example Brown, G (2001) and Cannings et al (2005).

[34] Expectations relating to external examining are set out in the *Code of practice, Section 4.*

External examiners comment on the reliability of the assessment process - especially whether assessment criteria have been appropriately applied - and on its fairness. They are no longer seen as the final arbiter of individual student marks, altering individual marks or (with very specific exceptions in a small number of disciplines) conducting vivas.[35]

External examiners will offer an opinion when consulted by the internal examiners in the event of the internal markers being unable to agree; however, in this situation the involvement of a third internal marker is often preferred to invoking the external. The final decision in each and every case is explicitly that of the relevant board of examiners, exercising delegated authority from the senior academic committee of the university (see the 'Boards of examiners' section).

Through sampling assessed work and judging the reliability and appropriateness of the internal marking, the external examiner may reach the view that marking has been unduly harsh or generous. Where this is the case the institution or department should have in place guidance as to what action should be taken. In some cases this may involve considering whether to raise or lower the marks for the entire cohort, or even undertaking some re-marking (time limits may often make the latter impractical).

All aspects of the way in which internal examiners engage with the external examiner should have been agreed at the outset of the external's term of office, subject to institutional and national expectations. You should therefore have received guidance on your likely interaction with the external examiner, and have been given an opportunity to meet him or her. Practice will vary as to whether this is early on in the academic year (when an external examiner might attend a briefing/induction day including time in the department) or during the marking period and at the board of examiners meeting.

Involvement in assessment tasks

Another important aspect of the external examiner's role in relation to maintaining standards concerns the setting of assessment tasks. You should be aware that while you might have been asked to draft some or all of the assessment tasks these may be scrutinised by the external examiner. The extent to which she is involved will have been agreed on appointment, including which tasks she wants to see. Bear in mind that the external is not responsible for everything - the institution is responsible for the standards of its awards - but external examiners hold an important role in providing an external perspective. As such their opinions and judgements are persuasive - not binding but not to be rejected lightly or without a dialogue with the external.

Using quantitative data to evaluate marking

Statistical information relating to the results of different groups of students (for example within or across modules, including trend data - usually over three years) can assist the process of determining whether marking has been appropriate. Such data might include pass rates and/or average marks which can be compared between different markers, and between different programme providers (in the case of collaborative provision).

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[35] See for example Ellis (2010:14). An excellent practical account of the role is provided by Cowan (2009), which although targeted at those working in the engineering disciplines has wider application. The HEA is developing a generic handbook for external examiners which will be available via its website before the end of 2011.

Institutional practice varies as to when and how such data are considered. Consideration of the data at or before the board of examiners' meeting facilitates moderation by enabling informed decisions to be made about the current cohort. Increasingly institutions are putting in place information systems capable of generating such data quickly.

Careful analysis of data is required. Where the mean mark for a module is higher than might be expected, this does not necessarily mean that the module has been too easy; it could be the result of innovative teaching methods, particularly where students have developed a strong interest in the topic, or it might occur for a number of other reasons.[36] This is where the experience of more senior examiners, and in particular the external examiner, will be significant.

Administrative procedures

Procedures for recording, verifying and adjusting marks are key to the maintenance of standards.[37] Security is of the utmost importance here. It is also desirable to have processes for verifying that marks presented to examination boards are accurate and complete. This verification includes ensuring that all parts of a student's work have been marked, that marks have been correctly transcribed to the front sheet of examination scripts, and so on.

It is therefore important to be clear about what the procedures are in your department and which tasks, such as inputting and checking marks, are your responsibility. It is also important to ensure that you are clear about the deadlines for each stage of the marking and recording process. Typically, and especially at the end of the academic year and during reassessment periods, timelines for each aspect of the assessment process are very tight and can fail if one stage is not completed when required. For example, a board of examiners cannot make its decisions without a complete set of marks for the module or programme.

Boards of examiners

Introducing boards of examiners

Institutions establish boards of examiners (sometimes known as assessment boards or assessment panels) as the bodies with formal responsibilities for overseeing the assessment process at module, departmental and/or programme/award level, and for making decisions about individual students' assessment outcomes. Such boards are provided for in the institution's statutes, ordinances or regulations and exercise some element of delegated authority from the senate or equivalent senior academic body. Expectations about the conduct and membership of boards of examiners are set out in the *Code of practice, Section 6* (Precept 4).

Types of boards

In many, but certainly not all, institutions, boards of examiners operate on a two-tier basis: one tier charged with determining individual module or unit results, the other with progression from one stage or year to another and the overall final result for the

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[36]   'Standard deviation' (which indicates the extent to which (in this case) marks are scattered around the mean mark) is another valuable statistical indicator. Generally marks for assessment tasks based around coursework tend to be higher than those based around examinations, for example, Bridges et al (2002).

[37]   See *Code of practice, Section 6*, Precept 15.

named award. Neither approach is right or wrong - the decision is a matter for the individual institution.

Where a single tier applies, it is important to be clear about how decisions are conducted relating to the marks awarded for individual units relative to the overall decision about progression or final award. Where two tiers are used there may be some variation in the formulation of those tiers. For example the higher level board (programme/award board) may not have the authority to change decisions about individual marks decided by the first tier/module board.

Board membership and operation

Each board will normally comprise the internal examiners and relevant external examiner(s), and will be chaired by a senior academic supported by an administrator as secretary. Staff involved in delivering, or at least leading, the module/programme should expect to attend. Although some aspects of the decision-making process may seem to be more about procedure than academic judgement, this is the culmination of the assessment process and needs to be conducted with the same level of commitment, rigour and equity as the stages leading up to it.

You therefore need to be clear about which board(s) you are a member of, which meetings you need to attend and what you may be expected to do before and during those meetings. Note that there are different ways of conducting meetings, for example considering student cases on an exception basis (such as borderlines, fails and special cases), or considering students in mark order rather than by name or number order (see 'Anonymity' below). You may find that your institution (perhaps through the quality support office or equivalent) produces guidance or training for staff about the boards of examiners and regulations applicable to them.

At the beginning of each meeting members of the board will be given the opportunity to declare any interest that they may have, for example in the form of a personal interest, involvement or relationship with a student whose results are being considered by the board. Such interest does not necessarily bar the member of staff from attending the meeting, but it may do so, depending on the precise nature of the interest and the role of the member of staff.

Anonymity

A number of institutions operate examination board systems where candidates are considered anonymously, typically by reference to candidate numbers. This approach requires careful preparation to ensure all results are accurate; it is designed to ensure that even unintentional bias, whether on gender or other grounds, is eliminated. The views of academics tend to be polarised as to whether there is any value in anonymity at this stage of the assessment process, especially taking into account the perceived risk of error.

Institutional practice varies as to whether the decision about anonymity is made centrally and applicable to all boards of examiners or left to the judgement of individual deans or heads of department.

Disclosure of results and confidentiality

What is discussed in the board of examiners meeting is confidential, and the decisions made are collective even where individual members may occasionally disagree. Staff must also be aware of the rules governing the disclosure of results, both the timing and what can be disclosed. Now, in many cases, responsibilities for disclosure are centralised and therefore do not involve action by individual academic staff. Increasingly results are provided to students electronically through the institution's virtual learning environment or intranet.

It is incorrect to talk about 'publication' of results.[38] Results can be notified only privately to the student to whom they relate unless the student has given written permission for them to be provided to another named person or for them to be published. The latter includes displaying the results on the departmental notice board, whether relating to an individual module or to overall degree classification.[39] Results should never be provided orally, especially over the telephone (when the identity of the recipient cannot be proven) and where there is also the risk of error.

Assessment regulations and degree classification

Regulations concerning the award of qualifications

Institutions increasingly have university-wide (or at least discipline-wide) regulations governing a range of matters concerning the award of qualifications. These matters include: the pass mark; programme structures; the award and accumulation of credits (or equivalent); progression or lack of it (including reassessment and the consequences of failing); and the classification of awards. Practice varies as to the extent to which discipline-specific elements are reflected in these regulations, and as to the impact of professional body requirements.

The majority of institutions now use a credit-based approach to taught higher education qualifications. Their qualifications have a standard credit tariff reflecting the appropriate credit framework.[40] Some institutions prefer to focus on European Credit Transfer and Accumulation (ECTS) credits.[41]

In their regulations, institutions give consideration to concepts such as the following (definitions and applicability must be checked with the individual institution):

- **compensation** - awarding a pass where the module mark is just below the pass mark based on performance in other modules (normally distinct from exceptional circumstances explained earlier)

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[38] The *Data Protection Act 1998* places legal obligations on individuals as well as institutions.

[39] The practice of displaying results on notice boards identifying only the candidate number rather than the name is relatively common.

[40] In Scotland this is *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* which forms part of the broader Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework www.scqf.org.uk. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the credit framework and the qualifications framework are separate: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/qualifications.
Report on the use of credit in England (2009): www.qaa.ac.uk/Newsroom/PressReleases/Pages/Credit-survey-shows-solid-support-for-framework.aspx.

[41] See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm.

- **condonement** - allowing a fail to be disregarded in determining progression or eligibility for the award

- **referral** - allowing a further attempt at the module in its entirety.

Pass marks

Pass marks vary to some extent between institutions, although the most common appear to be 40 for undergraduate awards and 50 for master's. It is important to emphasise that the pass mark is no more than a numerical label indicating how far the requirements for the module have been met, using the assessment criteria defined for it. In practical terms it makes no difference whether the pass mark is 25, 40, 50 or not a number at all. What matters is that the assessment criteria used to determine the mark awarded are robust and appropriate relative to the assessment tasks, the overall assessment strategy and the learning outcomes. The issue is more acute where marks are used together to determine overall outcomes, especially across subjects or disciplines.[42]

Reassessment

In reassessment it is important that opportunities - and students' rights - are clearly set out and that assessment tasks are as carefully designed as the initial assessment tasks. This is necessary to ensure that students - and staff - are clear about what happens in the event of failing. One aspect which must not be overlooked is the question of whether reassessment involves retaking only the elements failed or retaking all of the assessment tasks for the module. This should be determined in designing the module at the outset.[43]

Assessment design has to reflect the fact that reassessment will probably be undertaken after the standard teaching/assessment period (perhaps July or, more commonly, late August), involving a smaller number of students. This affects the method(s) that can be used, in the case of group work for example. Such timing issues need to be anticipated and built in at the design stage of the programme, taking into account institutional expectations.

In the case of master's degrees there may also be issues about the timing of taught modules relative to commencing the dissertation (or equivalent); it may be inappropriate to allow the student to start the dissertation until reassessments have been completed successfully.

Another issue to consider is the mark awarded for a successful reassessment. Institutions can be expected to determine whether a limit is placed on the mark awarded to indicate that the student has had a second opportunity and to limit the scope for gaining what may be perceived as an unfair advantage over the student who passes first time. The official transcript (issued at the end of the period of study) can be expected to make explicit the number of attempts that the student has had to pass (for further information see the 'Recording student achievement' section). Practice may vary between capping the overall mark for the module and simply capping the mark for the individual assessment task being repeated.

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[42] For analysis of these issues see Yorke, M, Woolf, H et al (2008).

[43] See earlier section on 'Programme design'. As noted earlier, reassessments need to be subject to the same kind of processes as first assessments to ensure that they are robust, that appropriate marking criteria are used and the marks are properly verified and recorded.

Classification

Discussion of classification most commonly focuses on the honours degree. This is especially the case in the debate about how student achievement might be recorded and communicated in a more informative way which might, in time, replace the honours classification.[44] Higher Education Achievement Reports (HEAR), intended to provide prospective employers with a much broader range of information about each student's achievements, are currently being trialled with the aim of implementation from 2012.[45] However, there is no sign of a consensus on the phasing out of honours degree classification. In its final report, the Burgess Group stopped short of recommending the abolition of the honours degree classification, recommending that it should continue 'alongside' the HEAR.[46]

It should be remembered that while classification of honours degrees is used by all institutions on a broadly similar basis (first through to third class), there is much greater variation of practice in the use of classification for other awards, most commonly master's degrees (using distinction and, less commonly, merit). Some Foundation Degrees also use merit and distinction. In a number of cases institutions also carry forward the achievement from some or all of the Foundation Degree towards the corresponding honours degree.

One of the issues with classification, especially of the honours degree, is the variation in practice between institutions as to how the final classification is determined. This is because a variety of elements contribute to the classification decision, such as: the pass mark; the weighting of modules; the weighting of individual years; the number of reassessment opportunities; and the use of 'safety nets' such as compensation, condonement and referral (see 'Regulations concerning the award of qualifications' at the beginning of this section).

One of the most extensive pieces of research, undertaken by the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG), looked at institutional regulations from 35 institutions. SACWG found variations in:

- the use of percentage marks and/or grades

- the approach to marks at the borderline of a classification (both the definition of what constitutes a borderline and how such cases are progressed)

- the number of modules included for classification purposes (relating to second and final year)

- the option to include additional modules

- the option to discount modules. (Yorke et al, 2008, pp 161-163).

According to this research '[a]n issue that is very rarely addressed is whether or not assessment is intended to focus on the best performance of which students have shown themselves capable, or the level of performance achieved in practice over an extended period of time - which may well be below "peak" performance' (Yorke et al, 2008:173-4).[47]

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[44] In Scotland the honours degree is four years, but there remains a strong tradition in some institutions of awarding an ordinary degree typically after three years of study. In some cases this ordinary degree can be awarded with merit or distinction.

[45] For more information see http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/diversity/achieve.

[46] See 'Beyond the honours degree classification', The Burgess Group final report, Universities UK, 2007 www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/Publication-272.aspx.

[47] And see the earlier discussion about the use of numbers in the context of the marking scale and pass marks.

Academic integrity in assessment

Introducing academic integrity

In the interests of academic integrity, staff should ensure that, at all levels of assessment (from first year undergraduate to doctoral thesis), students understand what is required as part of the academic study of any discipline. This also forms part of a wider approach of encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning behaviour as a fundamental element of higher education in the UK (see Academic Integrity Service, 2010).[48]

To secure standards it is imperative to know that only those students who have merited an award through their own efforts (allowing for group/joint work) receive one, and therefore that students have not plagiarised or engaged in any form of cheating. The way that such matters are handled varies between institutions, not least in terms of the type of penalties imposed.[49] While your institution is responsible for putting in place effective mechanisms for dealing with alleged cases of malpractice, academic staff play a key role in instilling good practice in students and detecting possible cases.

Students who are suspected of any form of misconduct have the (legal) right to have such matters investigated in accordance with due process.[50] The consequences can be very serious and long-term, with penalties resulting in, for example, the downgrading of a degree classification or the denial of the opportunity to practise in a profession such as nursing, medicine or social work (see below for issues of professional misconduct).

The role of academic staff

As a member of academic staff, your starting point is to know the extent of your responsibility - in this case, in particular, it is as important to know what is beyond your remit as to know what is within it.

You can expect your institution to have clear regulations governing all aspects of academic misconduct or unacceptable academic practice (whichever is the preferred term) and to provide appropriate staff training opportunities. Such regulations are likely to include:

- details of the responsibilities of members of staff, and the limits to these

- definitions and examples of different types of misconduct

- procedures to manage cases

- a set of penalties (see Academic Integrity Service, 2011).

Such regulations may be supplemented by procedures at faculty/department/partner institution level. Practice varies, for example as to whether allegations must be handled locally (through the head of department or dean) or centrally (through the registrar or academic standards unit).

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[48] *Code of practice, Section 6,* Precept 14 sets out the expectation of institutions encouraging students to 'adopt good academic conduct'.

[49] For a survey of practice see Tennant, P et al (2008).

[50] This area is governed by the *Human Rights Act 1998* and by extensive Common Law in each of the four UK countries. Decisions relating to academic integrity are also a common cause for complaint resulting in cases being taken to the OIA (England and Wales) and the SPSO in Scotland. See section on complaints below.

Staff working in partner institutions (such as further education colleges) need to be clear about the extent to which their college is responsible for dealing with possible cases, and the extent of the involvement of the awarding institution.

Plagiarism

Definitions

Institutions will have their own definitions of plagiarism. Such definitions will recognise that there are distinctions between plagiarism and conduct that may be referred to as poor academic practice. An example of the latter is where the student makes such extensive use of sources, especially quotations, that there is little evidence of thought or little serious attempt to answer the question.[51] Such cases are likely to be dealt with differently from plagiarism - for example through a reduction in marks - and therefore are more likely to be more your responsibility as an internal examiner.

Preventing plagiarism

There are two key ways in which plagiarism might be prevented. The first is to include, through the design of the programme or module, assessment methods that may mean plagiarism is unlikely. This does not mean replacing all essays or equivalents with unseen examinations, but it does mean considering a variety of assessment methods and how they are implemented. This might involve, for example, making sure that essay titles are not reused from one year to the next. It also means ensuring that assessment rules are clear, especially in cases where the learning activity involves group work whereas the summative assessment task is intended to be individual (albeit based upon that group work). The second way involves ensuring, as far as possible, that students understand what constitutes good academic practice, why it is important, and the consequences of not adhering to it. Such development of students' understanding should be embedded into the department's arrangements for delivering the curriculum, from initial induction and beyond. Messages and good habits need to be reinforced throughout the period of study, including through using formative assessment, and especially when students are introduced to new forms of assessment. (See Academic Integrity Service, 2011.)

Students must be properly informed about how they are expected to reference the work of others. Careful attention should be paid to the implications of adopting different systems between departments/subjects for joint students, or those taking single modules in different disciplines. Institutions increasingly make available specialist support services to assist students who need help with study skills, including referencing.

It is important to know what help students are entitled to expect in preparing for assessments, and its limits. This relates to whether you are expected to read and comment on drafts of work intended for summative assessment. Your institution may employ specialist study skills advisers to comment on draft work, developing students' skills in writing in English or meeting mathematical requirements. Students must be clear about what is their responsibility, so that they do not place undue reliance on advice given by tutors/specialist advisers.

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[51] Provided the sources have been acknowledged in this scenario, it is not plagiarism.

Students may be asked to sign and submit declarations with their work, confirming that it is their own and that all sources have been appropriately referenced. Such declarations are designed to have a deterrent effect, although their main purpose may be to make it harder to plead ignorance where plagiarism is detected. The nature and form of such declarations clearly have to be tailored to the type of assessment task and the medium of submission.

Text-matching software

Text-matching software such as Turnitin provides a key method for helping to determine whether material may have been copied,[52] and is used by an increasing number of institutions. This software does not guarantee robust evidence that work, or part of it, is plagiarised. Rather, it matches the text contained in the work with a growing database of texts, highlighting any matches and their extent. This enables a marker to determine whether such matching indicates that text may have been copied from other sources, and assists them in locating the source of the original text if necessary.

This kind of software may also act as a deterrent. An awareness that Turnitin is being used may make students less likely to copy material, or more likely to admit to it if they have, enabling the matter to be resolved quickly.[53] In some institutions the software is available to students to help them develop their academic writing skills and understand the importance of referencing sources. In such cases it can be used as a developmental tool or a learning aid. (See Heather, 2010.)

Other forms of misconduct

While plagiarism tends to be the act of students working alone, there are types of premeditated collaborative cheating. Examples include copying another student's entire essay (not always with that person's knowledge/consent); the group production of an essay; and the purchase of essays from internet sources.

Further forms of misconduct include cheating in examinations (especially impersonation), falsifying laboratory results, unethical practices,[54] and dishonest applications for extensions/mitigating circumstances. Institutional regulations should define how these will be addressed and specify which staff have authority to consider allegations. In many cases registry (or equivalent) staff may play a key role in overseeing examinations and gathering evidence of alleged cheating, but academic staff may be the providers of evidence, for example where they are involved as invigilators.

Other forms of misconduct may be addressed through separate regulations, for example library/computing regulations that govern cases of misusing or damaging library resources, and the use of computing equipment for illicit or illegal purposes. Institutions generally have separate regulations for addressing non-academic misconduct, for example harassment of staff or other students.

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[52] See www.submit.ac.uk; www.plagiarismadvice.org.

[53] Evidence to date is inconclusive on the deterrence effect.

[54] Note that research undertaken whether at undergraduate or postgraduate levels may require approval to ensure that what is proposed conforms to current standards of ethics. For sources see for example: www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/ethics_across_curriculum.pdf. For a thought - provoking analysis see Ethics 'in' and 'for' Higher Education, a paper presented by Prof Peter Scott at the International Conference on Ethical and Moral Dimensions for Higher Education and Science in Europe, 2-5 September 2004, www.cepes.ro/September/scott_print.htm.

Professional misconduct/fitness to practise

Allegations of academic misconduct are particularly serious where the programme of study leads to an entitlement to professional practice, for example in areas such as health/medicine, social work and teaching. The relevant professional body - which may have a direct role in accrediting courses (see 'Meeting the requirements of PSRBs' in the 'Assessment in course design' section) - will generally have laid down professional standards to which students must adhere during their studies (not necessarily solely limited to while on placement). Each institution should have regulations governing the investigation of allegations, and the penalties applicable if they are proven. Proven cases may have to be reported to the professional body; alternatively the relevant body may expect to be involved in determining allegations or specifying penalties.

The extent to which this area and the other forms of academic misconduct outlined above overlap varies from one profession to another. For example, plagiarism may be regarded as an academic matter or it may be regarded as a form of professional misconduct because of the implicit dishonesty involved.

Providing evidence, advice and support

In the case of an allegation of plagiarism or academic misconduct you may be required to provide evidence. By contrast, if you are a personal tutor or supervisor you may have the very different role of providing advice and support to a student who is the subject of an allegation.

Complaints and appeals

Introducing complaints and appeals

Complaints and appeals relate to matters of concern for individual students, and where a specific outcome is usually being sought. They are therefore handled separately, rather than as part of the process of gathering feedback from students through staff/student committees or questionnaires. Institutions do, however, make use of data from such cases to inform the enhancement of their provision.

Your institution will have in place procedures for addressing complaints and appeals, and these will reflect national expectations that they are fair, transparent and timely, and are likely to have been developed in consultation with the students' union.[55] They will probably include opportunities for informal resolution - this might include using structured mechanisms such as mediation or arbitration. There may also be a student advice service provided by either the institution or the students' union.

Academic staff should have a broad understanding of the procedures, as part of the expectation that institutions inform students of their rights (and obligations). In particular, you should be aware of any time limits so that you can provide appropriate advice if required. You might need to provide support or advice to a student[56] or supply information

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[55] See *Code of practice, Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters.*

[56] Students generally have the right to be accompanied at a hearing by a person of their choosing who might therefore be a personal tutor or other member of academic or administrative staff.

for an investigation. At some stage in your career you might also have the opportunity to serve on an appeals or complaints panel, as institutions rely on academic staff to comprise at least part of the membership.

The difference between complaints and appeals

There are two aspects of terminology in relation to complaints and appeals which need to be understood. The first is the distinction between the two; the second is the meaning of academic judgement.

Broadly, the distinction between complaints and appeals rests on whether the student is challenging a decision about his/her academic progress. The following distinction is fairly widely recognised.

Appeal: a challenge to a specific decision relating to a student's academic progress, such as the mark awarded for a particular assessment, the overall assessment outcome at module or programme level, or the decision about progression (for example, allowing progress to the next year of the programme). Most commonly for an undergraduate student this would relate to final degree classification or the termination of a programme of study.

Complaint: a stated grievance about any aspect of the student's experience provided by the university, whether an intrinsic part of the course of study (such as the quality of teaching, cancellation of lectures, lack of appropriate resources) or a more general issue (for example crèche or car parking facilities, safety around the campus, canteen facilities for part-time students). The definition given earlier of quality as relating to the student learning experience/opportunities strictly speaking excludes such matters, but from a student's perspective it is hard to draw a distinction where factors such as safety or childcare arrangements fundamentally affect their opportunity to attend teaching sessions and carry out private study.

However, some cases are complex and a set of circumstances may give rise to both a complaint and an appeal.

Institutions rarely accept appeals against academic judgement; that is, the decision of the examiner(s) that a piece of work merits a specific mark, or the decision of a board of examiners to award a 2:1 rather than a 2:2. The student wishing to appeal will have to demonstrate that some aspect of the process leading to the decision was flawed, for example that relevant information was not considered (such as mitigating circumstances), irrelevant information was considered, or that the decision was biased.

A similar approach applies in the case of professional judgement, such as whether the student is deemed fit to practise. While the procedure underpinning the decision may be challenged, the exercise of professional judgement may not. One reason for this is that an appeal body would be unlikely to be capable of making its own professional judgement.

In both types of case, if the appeal is allowed the outcome would normally be that the original decision is deemed void and the original body (such as the board of examiners) is required to reconsider the matter.

External resolution of complaints and appeals

The way complaints and appeals are handled by institutions is also subject to independent external scrutiny. Students have a right of access to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) in England and Wales and the Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman in Scotland (SPSO).[57] Currently there is no comparable arrangement in Northern Ireland, although students at the Universities of Ulster and Queen's each have access to their University's Visitor. While the OIA and SPSO differ in their remits,[58] their approach is comparable. First, the complainant must have exhausted the internal appeals/complaints mechanisms of the institution in question. Second, the matter can only be concerned with the **process** of decision-making. Thus matters of academic judgement will not be reviewed, and neither the OIA nor the SPSO will substitute their decision for that of the university that is the subject of the investigation.[59]

Legal challenges

The jurisdiction of the OIA and SPSO does not prevent a student seeking legal redress through the courts, and given uncertainty over the level of compensation that might be recommended in a given case, there may be situations where a legal challenge (for example for breach of contract) might be more effective. This is unlikely to help in the case of issues around degree classification, and the courts have shown themselves unwilling to second guess judgements that are better made by those with first-hand knowledge of the issues and procedures, provided fairness is evident. They have so far shown reluctance to review academic judgement.[60]

Recording student achievement

All institutions are expected to provide students, at least on completion, with an official transcript certifying the results achieved (usually broken down at least to module/unit level).[61] Many also provide the European Diploma Supplement.[62]

As indicated earlier, the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) is currently under development, designed to incorporate the Transcript and Diploma Supplement and to provide more extensive information about each student's achievements at the institution.

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[57]   www.oiahe.org.uk; www.spso.org.uk.

[58]   The OIA's sole purpose is to consider complaints by HE students, whereas the SPSO also investigates complaints about the provision of a wide range of public services. Currently the OIA scheme is only open to universities, although there is an ongoing discussion about extending its remit to further education colleges that deliver HE courses, and the admission of private providers.

[59]   The annual reports of the two bodies provide examples of the types of cases they consider and the remedies awarded. See www.oiahe.org.uk/decisions-and-publications/annual-reports.aspx and www.spso.org.uk/media-centre/annual-reports.

[60]   See for example the judicial review application in Northern Ireland, Croskery's (Andrew) Application [2010] NIQB 129: http://www.courtsni.gov.uk/en-gb/judicial%20decisions/publishedbyyear/documents/2010/2010%20niqb%20129/j_j_tre8033final.htm

[61]   See the explanatory note to the *Code of practice, Section 6*, Precept 15.

[62]   See for example: www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/eu_policy___education/diploma_supplement.cfm.

Monitoring and reviewing arrangements for assessment

All institutions operate mechanisms to monitor and review their academic provision.[63] In relation to assessment this will include monitoring the standards of student achievement; it will also include ensuring that assessment is measuring and promoting student learning. Academic staff play a key role in carrying out monitoring at module and programme/subject levels and in contributing to reviews carried out periodically.

Monitoring standards

An effective way of monitoring standards is through considering quantitative data, which includes making comparisons within and across provision and looking at trends (typically across three years). Such monitoring might be carried out initially by boards of examiners as part of considering students' results (see the 'Boards of examiners' section), or at a later stage as part of the annual monitoring or periodic review process.[64]

Evaluating the provision

All institutions have in place procedures to facilitate the annual monitoring of modules/ programmes and for periodic review, usually every five to six years. Such procedures will reflect sector good practice and be designed to ensure that a variety of sources of feedback are considered by staff responsible for the provision.[65] They not only enable provision to be monitored but allow opportunities for enhancement to be identified. Periodic review provides an opportunity for a more intensive evaluation with input from those outside the programme team or delivering department.

As a member of a programme/module team you might therefore be asked for your feedback on the delivery of the provision during the year and possible changes that might enhance it, taking into account other feedback received from the external examiner(s), and from students via internal questionnaires, focus groups or staff/student committees, and external sources such as the National Student Survey.

The role of the external examiner in monitoring provision

Institutions are expected to ensure that an external examiner (see the 'Marking' section) is appointed for all academic provision leading to an HE award.[66] This is reinforced through QAA review methods (see below) where there are clear expectations that institutions are making robust use of their external examiners. As indicated earlier, the external examiner can play an important role in helping the institution (including the programme team) to assure itself that academic standards are being maintained. However, he/she can also act as a 'critical friend' offering advice through his/her external perspective on the development of the programme.

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[63] Guidance on good practice is published in the *Code of practice, Section 7*, published by QAA.

[64] QAA *Outcomes* papers provide useful insights into institutional practice, including on the use of progression and completion statistics: www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/Pages/Outcomes.aspx.

[65] For further information see the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*. In Scotland, institutions are also required to adhere to guidance published by the Scottish Funding Council, which includes annual reporting to the Council on reviews conducted in the previous year.

[66] See the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*. A revised version will be published at the end of October 2011.

External examiners' reports

An important expectation of the external examiner role is the provision to the institution of feedback relating both to the standards achieved and aspects of the quality of the provision. Such feedback will be provided formally through a written report submitted annually to the institution (often via the vice-chancellor's office or academic standards unit), but may also be provided informally to the programme team at the module/programme boards.[67]

Equally, the external examiner is not simply employed once at the end of the year. There is likely to be scope for interaction throughout the year, and this should be the subject of discussion with the external on or before his/her appointment. Involvement tends to be more direct and extensive in disciplines where assessments are more practical/visual such as performing arts and fine art, but this does not have to be solely the case. Practice varies between institutions and between disciplines on whether, and to what extent, external examiners meet with students.

Institutional review

QAA conducts an institutional-level scrutiny of institutions every four to six years in accordance with a methodology published following consultation with the sector, and in line with the expectations of the relevant funding body. The essence of each review lies in the principle of peer review, while students are central to the process, and the reviews result in the publication of a report for each institution. Reviews focus on the effectiveness with which each institution maintains the standards of its awards[68] and quality of its provision. As such, interaction at the individual subject level is limited, although processes relating to individual subjects provide some of the evidence seen by reviewers (for example, from annual monitoring, periodic reviews, external examiner reports and so on).[69]

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[67] In the revised version of the *Code of practice, Section 4* there is an expectation that external examiners' reports be shared in full with students.

[68] Reviews of colleges that do not have degree awarding powers focus on how each college has worked within the expectations set by its awarding institution(s).

[69] The details and title of each method differ slightly between countries within the UK. For further information about each method and the outcomes of individual reviews see: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/default.aspx.

Further information/sources of expertise

Good practice relating to assessment, external examining, programme approval, monitoring and review has been collated and published by QAA in the form of the *Code of practice.* Other parts of what is currently termed the 'Academic Infrastructure' are also important in setting and maintaining academic standards - the frameworks for higher education qualifications and subject benchmark statements. Institutions are expected to make information about their programmes available in the form of programme specifications.

QAA also publishes a range of information on assessment including *Outcomes* papers (providing an overview of how assessment has been considered in Institutional audits in England and Northern Ireland)[70] and Enhancement Themes reports relating to assessment in Scotland.[71]

The HEA promotes good practice in assessment and provides expert guidance through its publications and programme of activities on assessment and feedback, including workshops involving staff in higher education.[72]

There are two Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning whose work is directly relevant to assessment (and which have been referenced throughout this document):

• Assessment for Learning at the University of Northumbria, http://www.northumbria. ac.uk/sd/central/ar/lteia/cetl_afl

• Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) at Oxford Brookes University, http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske.

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[70] See www.qaa.ac.uk/improvinghighereducation/pages/published-outcomes-papers.aspx.

[71] See Assessment www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/assessment/default.asp and Integrative Assessment www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/integrativeassessment/default.asp.

[72] For further information see: www.heacademy.ac.uk.

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