



UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards

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About the Quality Code

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) is the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers.¹ It makes clear what higher education providers are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of them. The Quality Code covers all four nations of the UK and all providers of UK higher education operating internationally. It protects the interests of all students, regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate students.

Part C: Information about higher education provision and each Chapter of Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality contains a single Expectation, which expresses the key principle that the higher education community has identified as essential for the assurance of academic standards and quality within the area covered by the Chapter or Part. Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards contains seven Expectations. Higher education providers reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) are required to meet all the Expectations. The manner in which they do so is their own responsibility. QAA carries out reviews to check whether higher education providers are meeting the Expectations.²

Each Part and Chapter has been developed by QAA through an extensive process of consultation with higher education providers; their representative bodies; the National Union of Students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; and other interested parties.

Higher education providers are also responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Part or Chapter where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources.

The Expectations in each Part or Chapter are accompanied by a series of Indicators that reflect sound practice, and through which providers can demonstrate they are meeting the relevant Expectation. Indicators are not designed to be used as a checklist; they are intended to help providers reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices to demonstrate that the Expectations in the Quality Code are being met. Each Indicator is numbered and printed in bold and is supported by an explanatory note that gives more information about it, together with examples of how the Indicator may be interpreted in practice. Indicators are grouped into clusters under a heading.

The *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: General introduction*³ should be considered in conjunction with this document. It provides a technical introduction for users, including guidance concerning the terminology used and a quick-reference glossary.

¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode

² www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-introduction.aspx

About Part A

Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications and how the standards are secured. Part A explains how academic standards are set and maintained for higher education qualifications in the UK. It brings together a number of frameworks, statements and guidance concerned with academic standards and explains how they relate to each other and how collectively they provide an integrated context for setting and maintaining academic standards in higher education. It sets out what is expected of degree-awarding bodies and other higher education providers in setting, delivering and maintaining the academic standards of the awards that they make. Part B of the Quality Code sets out in more detail the processes in which higher education providers engage in order to set, deliver and maintain academic standards, and to assure and enhance the quality of learning opportunities.

Part A now formally brings together, and places in an explanatory context:

- the UK national frameworks for higher education qualifications (which set out the different qualification levels and national expectations of standards of achievement)
- subject benchmark statements which set out the nature and characteristics of degrees (typically bachelor's) and the outcomes expected to be achieved by graduates in specific subject areas
- The *Higher education credit framework for England: Guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*.

It does not replace any of these publications but provides links to the current versions. Part A supersedes the *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications* which is now replaced by an Expectation to provide definitive information about specific programmes of study.

External links

Higher education providers are responsible for ascertaining which laws and regulations apply to them. To meet the Expectation of this Chapter of the Quality Code, higher education providers may wish to consider the indicative lists of further guidelines, references and resources. QAA takes no responsibility for the content of external websites.

Introduction

The authority to make higher education academic awards

Higher education qualifications are awarded by degree-awarding bodies. The power to award UK degrees has been granted by Royal Charter, Papal Bull (in Scotland), Act of Parliament⁴ or, since 1999 by the Privy Council (on the basis of detailed scrutiny and confidential advice from QAA). This right to award UK degrees is legally protected⁵ and only those bodies recognised by the UK authorities for this purpose may award their own degrees.

There are three different types of degree-awarding powers which may be granted.

Foundation Degree-awarding powers (FDAP) give further education colleges in England and Wales the right to award Foundation Degrees at level five of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (see Chapter 1 below). These powers are granted on a six-year renewable basis.

Taught degree-awarding powers (TDAP) give UK higher education providers the right to award Foundation Degrees, bachelor's and master's degrees and other taught higher education qualifications up to level seven of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and up to level 11 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (see Chapter 1 below). These powers are granted indefinitely to institutions which are part of the publicly-funded higher education sector⁶ and on a six-year renewable basis for other providers of higher education.

Research degree-awarding powers give UK higher education providers with taught degree-awarding powers the right to award doctoral degrees and research master's degrees. These are higher education qualifications up to level eight of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and to level 12 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (see Chapter 1 below). These powers are granted indefinitely to degree-awarding bodies which are part of the publicly-funded higher education sector and on a six-year renewable basis for other providers of higher education.

The authority to award academic credit at higher education levels (see Chapter 1 below) also derives from these powers.

Degree-awarding bodies have the autonomy to determine the qualifications which they will award (consistent with the type of powers they hold), the programmes they will offer leading to these awards, the associated learning outcomes and the curriculum and assessment for these programmes. Within the UK there is no nationally determined curriculum and/or assessment for higher education qualifications. Neither is there a process of national accreditation or approval of programmes. Degree-awarding bodies have the authority to design, approve and assess the programmes that lead to their qualifications and have the responsibility for setting and maintaining the academic standards of those awards.

⁴ Section 76 of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*. Section 48 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992* and (in the case of Foundation Degree-awarding powers) Section 19 of the *Further Education and Training Act 2007* and Section 259 of the *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009* have enabled the Privy Council to make Orders granting UK degree-awarding powers.

⁵ The Education Reform Act 1988 made it an offence for a provider to offer, grant or issue a degree qualification which could be taken to be that of a UK institution without the body awarding the qualification being recognised by the UK authorities.

⁶ In accordance with the provisions of Section 91(5) of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*.

Definitions of academic standards

Academic standards are the standards that individual degree-awarding bodies set and maintain for the award of their academic credit or qualifications.

Threshold academic standards are the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. For equivalent awards, the threshold level of achievement is agreed across the UK and is described by the qualifications descriptors set out in the national frameworks for higher education qualifications (see Chapter 1 below).

Threshold academic standards are distinct from the standards of performance that a student would need to achieve to gain any particular class of award. Threshold academic standards do not relate to any individual award classification in any particular subject. They dictate the standard required to be able to label an award, for instance, Foundation Degree, bachelor's degree or master's degree. The primary focus of Part A is on how threshold academic standards are set and maintained.

Individual degree-awarding bodies are responsible for ensuring that threshold academic standards are met in their awards by aligning programme learning outcomes with the relevant qualification descriptors in the national frameworks for higher education qualifications. They are also responsible for setting the pass marks and also the grades, marks or classifications that differentiate between levels of student achievement above the threshold academic standards.

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are organisations that set the standards for, and regulate the standards of entry into, particular professions. Statutory bodies are set up through Act of Parliament and have a legal requirement to oversee a particular profession (for example, the General Medical Council). Professional bodies (for example, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors) are organisations that oversee the activities of a particular profession and represent the interests of its members. If a body has a statutory or regulatory responsibility it may be authorised by government to accredit, approve or recognise specific programmes as leading to, or providing exemption from part of, a relevant professional qualification.

Professional qualifications (as distinct from academic qualifications) are determined by PSRBs and they may stipulate academic requirements which must be met in order for an academic programme to be recognised as leading to, or providing exemption from part of, a professional qualification. Where degree-awarding bodies choose to offer programmes which lead to, or provide exemption from, specific professional qualifications, the requirements of the relevant PSRB will influence the design of academic programmes, but the responsibility for the academic standards remains with the degree-awarding body which is awarding the academic qualification. See also Chapter 1 below for how PSRBs contribute to subject benchmark statements.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Accreditation information table
www.hesa.ac.uk/C13061/accreditation_list

Degree-awarding bodies and other higher education providers

Degree-awarding bodies often work with other higher education providers or organisations to deliver higher education opportunities. Where this happens, degree-awarding bodies are responsible for setting the academic standards and are responsible for maintaining those academic standards irrespective of where the opportunities are delivered or who provides them. Other higher education providers that work with degree-awarding bodies are responsible for delivering and maintaining the academic standards of the degree-awarding body. Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for determining and recording the particular responsibilities of delivery organisations and other higher education providers for each specific arrangement. See *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others*.

Chapter 1: UK and European reference points for academic standards

Reference points are collectively agreed points of comparison or requirements (at international, national and degree-awarding body level) which are used by degree-awarding bodies to ensure consistency in academic standards.

Expectation A1

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the use of UK and European reference points, which degree-awarding bodies are required to meet.

In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland/The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland are met by:

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the framework**
- **ensuring that programme outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the framework**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the guidance**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined learning outcomes**

b) consider and take account of relevant subject benchmark statements

c) if they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the relevant national credit framework.

National qualifications frameworks for higher education

National qualifications frameworks

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are formal structures which are adopted by countries to define their qualification systems. Generally they identify qualification levels in ascending order and state the requirements for qualifications to be awarded at each of these levels. The frameworks show what qualifications are at the same level and how it is possible to progress from one qualification to another at a higher level. They are a tool both for securing threshold academic standards nationally and for making valid comparisons of qualifications internationally (thus facilitating student mobility). The fundamental premise of qualifications frameworks in Europe is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of learning outcomes (demonstrated through assessment against a standard) rather than duration of study.

UK frameworks for higher education qualifications

There are two parallel UK national frameworks for higher education: *The framework for higher education qualifications* (FHEQ), which applies to England, Wales and Northern Ireland and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS), which applies in Scotland. The frameworks define, and apply to, all higher education qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies. These are the foremost national reference points for threshold standards in UK higher education; they are supported by subject benchmark statements (see below). The frameworks are maintained by QAA

which is also responsible for quality assuring their use. Current versions⁷ of the UK frameworks are available at:

QAA (2008) The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England-Wales-and-Northern-Ireland.aspx

QAA (2001) The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/FHEQ-Scotland.aspx

The Scottish framework has six levels of higher education qualifications and the framework for the rest of the UK has five (the difference reflects the features of the different education systems operating in the UK, but the frameworks share core purposes and features). Each level represents a distinct level of intellectual achievement and is illustrated by a qualification descriptor for that level. These qualification descriptors are integral to an outcomes-based approach to the award of qualifications as they set out the generic outcomes, characteristics and attributes which holders of qualifications at that level possess in terms of what they know, understand and are able to do. In order for a qualification to be awarded, students are expected to have demonstrated achievement of the relevant outcomes. Both frameworks for higher education qualifications also expect a consistent approach to the use of qualification titles (conveying information about the level, nature and subject of study) in order to promote clarity and a common understanding of what UK higher education qualifications signify.

The UK national frameworks for higher education qualifications assist higher education providers, their external examiners and QAA reviewers by providing a point of reference for setting academic standards and assessing student achievement. Degree-awarding bodies position their qualifications at the appropriate level of the FHEQ/FQHEIS, ensure that programme outcomes meet the relevant qualification descriptor, and that the frameworks' requirements in respect of awarding and naming qualifications are met.

Qualifications awarded to students commencing programmes in or after the academic year 2003-4 have been made in accordance with the frameworks.

The FHEQ and FQHEIS are used as a reference point in QAA reviews of degree-awarding bodies. Degree-awarding bodies have to demonstrate how they align the intended learning outcomes of their awards with the levels of the relevant qualification in the FHEQ and FQHEIS (denoted by the qualification descriptor) when positioning their qualifications on the relevant framework. QAA reviews consider how degree-awarding bodies demonstrate that curriculum approval and review processes ensure that the structure of the programme or module (the volume, nature, and assessment of learning) is adequate to achieve the outcomes indicated by the frameworks (see *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*, *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and recognition of prior learning* and *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code). In particular QAA reviews consider how the UK frameworks are used by degree-awarding bodies to assure themselves that actual student achievement is of an academic standard which meets or exceeds the threshold standards set out in the relevant qualifications frameworks (see *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and recognition of prior learning*). In this way, QAA quality assures the use of the higher education frameworks in order that stakeholders both nationally and internationally may have confidence in higher education qualifications awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies.

⁷ The UK national frameworks of higher education qualifications were first published in 2001. The FHEQ was revised in 2008.

Other UK national qualifications frameworks

Within the UK there are also frameworks for general education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications. In Scotland and in Wales these are integrated into single credit and qualifications frameworks which cover all educational sectors and in which the FQHEIS and the FHEQ respectively are embedded. These are the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW). (See also the section on national credit frameworks below.) England and Northern Ireland currently have separate qualifications frameworks for vocational qualifications and general education qualifications in the form of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), which is regulated by Ofqual, and the National Qualifications Framework for England and Northern Ireland (NQF). Both the NQF and the QCF support qualifications at lower levels (entry level, level one and level two) up to level eight and include provision for vocational qualifications at higher levels (four to eight) which compare with the corresponding levels of the FHEQ. Examples of qualifications on the QCF are Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas awarded by Edexcel⁸. There are opportunities for progression between frameworks. In order to demonstrate the links between these various frameworks and how qualifications in the different jurisdictions of the UK, and its close neighbour the Republic of Ireland, compare with each other the authorities responsible for the frameworks have produced a guide to the qualifications frameworks (and the qualifications offered) in each of the countries: *Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*. This guide is maintained by QAA.

European qualifications frameworks

Both the FHEQ and the FQHEIS are aligned with the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (the FQ-EHEA). The UK is part of the intergovernmental initiative, commonly referred to as the Bologna Process, which aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to make Europe's higher education systems more transparent thus creating opportunities for increased student and graduate mobility. The FQ-EHEA provides a mechanism for relating the national qualifications frameworks of different countries to each other. All 47 countries participating in the Bologna Process are required⁹ to establish national frameworks for higher education qualifications which are quality assured by a competent body and to verify the compatibility of their frameworks with the FQ-EHEA. Summaries of the conclusions and implications of the verification processes for the UK (undertaken by QAA for Scotland in 2006 and for England Wales and Northern Ireland in 2008) are published in:

QAA (2011) *A brief guide to the Bologna Process: The Bologna Process in higher education: Compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Bologna-Process-in-HE.aspx

QAA, *The Bologna process in higher education - Compatibility of the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland with the European Higher Education Area*

www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/Pages/Bologna-Self-Certification-Scotland.aspx

⁸ HNCs and HNDs which appear on the FHEQ are only those which are awarded by degree-awarding bodies under licence from Edexcel.

⁹ This requirement was set for countries participating in the Bologna Process in the 2003 Bergen ministerial communique.

A European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) has also been agreed by the European Commission (covering all educational sectors) and the FHEQ and FQHEIS are also compatible with this framework.

Other guidance on qualification characteristics

QAA publishes additional guidance on the characteristics of certain qualifications:

QAA (2011) *Doctoral degree characteristics*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Doctoral_characteristics.aspx

QAA (2010) *Master's degree characteristics*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Masters-degree-characteristics.aspx

QAA (2010) *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx

Doctoral degree characteristics and *Master's degree characteristics* provide information about the purposes, content, assessment methods and titles of different types of UK doctoral and master's degrees. They are additional reference points to provide advice and guidance for those responsible for doctoral and masters programmes.

The *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* identifies the distinctive features of the Foundation Degree (at level five). It describes the qualification in terms of its particular purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes, but it does not include subject-level detail.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Ofqual

<http://ofqual.gov.uk>

Scottish credit and qualifications framework

www.scqf.org.uk

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales

www.cqfw.net

Department for Employment and Learning, *Graduating to Success, A Higher education strategy for Northern Ireland*

www.delni.gov.uk/graduating-to-success-he-strategy-for-ni.pdf

QAA (2011) *Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualification in the UK and Ireland*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.aspx

The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation

<http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>

Bologna Process-European Higher Education Area

www.ehea.info

Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005) *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*

www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

EHEA Bologna Process

www.international.ac.uk/policy/ehea-bologna-process.aspx

QAA (2008) *Verification of the compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Verification-of-the-compatibility-of-The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England--Wales-and-Northern-Irel.aspx

QAA (2007) *Verification of compatibility of the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland with the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Report of the Scottish working group*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Verification-of-compatibility-of-the-framework-for-qualifications-of-higher-education-institutions-in-Scotland-with-the-fr.aspx

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

www.engq.eu

National credit frameworks for higher education

Credit and credit frameworks

Academic credit is a means of quantifying and recognising learning. Individual modules and programmes may be assigned a credit value which indicates both the amount of learning expected (the number of credits) and its depth, complexity and intellectual demand (the credit level). Thus credit can be used as a measure for the achievement of learning outcomes and allows the volume and level of outcomes to be described for qualifications. Credit frameworks define credit volumes and levels associated with particular qualifications, generally in terms of minimum numbers of credits both of the total for the programme and at the level of the award (the exit level). Where credit is used, credit frameworks are therefore important threshold reference points for those designing and approving academic programmes and bring consistency of approach to its use. Credit frameworks may also facilitate the recognition of students' learning by degree-awarding bodies which use credit in different parts of the UK and internationally.

UK credit frameworks

Both Scotland and Wales have integrated credit and qualifications framework which span all levels of education and vocational training, including higher education:

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework: www.scqf.org.uk

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales: www.cqfw.net

As a result of national agreements, all degree-awarding bodies in Scotland and in Wales use credit as a basis for their higher education qualifications. Most, but not all, degree-awarding bodies in England and Northern Ireland use credit-based systems in the design and management of their curricula and have done so for many years. The *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*¹⁰ provides guidance on the use of credit in the design of programmes leading to the main higher education qualifications awarded in England and Northern Ireland and complements the FHEQ. It is used by degree-awarding bodies which award UK credit in England and Northern Ireland. The current version of the framework is available at:

QAA (2008) *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Aug08.aspx

Although three different UK credit frameworks exist in the different jurisdictions of the UK, they are underpinned by a common approach. Within the UK, one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning (an estimate of how long it will take a typical student, on average, to achieve the learning outcomes including not only formal contact hours but time spent in preparation for classes, private or independent reading and study, revision and the completion of course-work). Degree-awarding bodies use this guide as a basis for setting the credit value of a module or programme before it is offered to students. Credit is awarded when the specific set of learning outcomes for a module or programme have been successfully achieved as demonstrated through completion of assessment to a threshold standard.

Within the context of the minimum credit values set out in the credit frameworks, UK degree-awarding bodies structure programmes in whatever ways are appropriate to the achievement of the aims of the qualifications, their teaching and learning strategy, and the characteristics of the associated learner groups. Credit frameworks can facilitate the transfer of credit between programmes and between institutions but this process is not automatic. Individual degree-awarding bodies are solely responsible for determining what credit they will accept for the purpose of credit transfer or accumulation towards their individual awards. Credit recognition implies eligibility to be considered for but not entitlement to admission. See also *Chapter B6: Assessment and recognition of prior learning* for more detailed information on recognition of prior learning.

¹⁰ The *Higher education credit framework for England: Guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* was published in August 2008 by the Credit Issues Development Group (CIDG), which comprised representatives of QAA, Universities UK, GuildHE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and other relevant practitioners and representatives. It is now maintained by QAA.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is the credit system used in the European Higher Education Area. The FQ-EHEA identifies ranges of ECTS associated with its qualification cycles, and verification of national qualifications frameworks to the FQ-EHEA have to include confirmation that ECTS, or an ECTS compatible credit framework, is used. Although there are a number of key differences between ECTS and the credit arrangements which apply within the UK, all UK credit arrangements have been confirmed as being compatible with ECTS as part of their verification processes. Many degree-awarding bodies also use ECTS to support student mobility within Europe and some in England award ECTS points rather than using the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*.

Further guidelines, references and resources

QAA (2009) *Academic credit in higher education in England - an introduction*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Academic-credit-in-higher-education-in-England---an-introduction.aspx

QAA (2008) *The frameworks for higher education qualifications and credit: how they relate to academic standards*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/The-frameworks-for-higher-education-qualifications-and-credit-how-they-relate-to-academic-standards.aspx

The UK Credit Forum

www.seec.org.uk/academic-credit/uk-credit-forum

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS):

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ects_en.htm

QAA (2009) *Joint Forum for Higher levels: Overarching Principles and Operational Criteria for a common approach to credit*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/joint-forum-higher-levels.aspx

Subject benchmark statements

Subject benchmark statements make explicit the nature and characteristics of awards in a specific subject area and set out the attributes and capabilities of graduates in that subject. Subject benchmark statements currently exist in four categories. These are:

- bachelor's degree with honours level subject benchmark statements
- master's level subject benchmark statements (in a limited number of subjects)
- subject benchmark statements for health professionals
- Scottish benchmark statements for qualifying awards for professions in Scotland which have been developed and published jointly by QAA, the relevant professional body and the Scottish Government.

Current versions of all subject benchmark statements are available at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statements.aspx

The qualification descriptors in the FHEQ and FQHEIS set out generic outcomes (as noted above). In order to exemplify how these qualification outcomes might be realised in the

context of delivering programmes, QAA works closely with subject communities in the higher education sector to develop subject benchmark statements. These set out what the outcomes (in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills) and attributes identified in the qualification descriptor for a bachelor's degree with honours would look like in a specific subject area. For example, the *Subject benchmark statement: History* sets out general outcomes and attributes which would be expected of a graduate in History and is aligned to the bachelor's degree with honours qualification descriptor. Some subject benchmark statements are combined with, or make reference to, professional standards required by external professional or regulatory bodies in the discipline. Subject benchmark statements describe outcomes and attributes expected at the threshold standard and, in most cases, also at the typical or modal level of achievement. They are therefore a primary reference point both for setting academic standards when new programmes are being designed and approved and for subsequent monitoring and review since they provide academic staff with a detailed framework for specifying intended programme outcomes.

Subject benchmark statements also describe what gives the subject its coherence and identity, the main characteristics of programmes and the nature of teaching, learning and assessment in that subject or subject area. However, they do not represent a national curriculum in a subject area; rather, they allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design within an overall conceptual framework. The subject areas covered by individual statements are deliberately broad, in order to be applicable to a wide range of higher education provision. Nevertheless, creativity and diversity are strengths of UK higher education and the aims and scope of programmes vary and may not fall clearly within the scope of a single subject benchmark statement. It may be the case that more than one statement is relevant to a programme or that the programme lies outside the coverage of the statements published to date. In such instances, higher education providers may draw upon more than one statement according to the emphases of the particular programme, or upon statements for cognate areas, as well as the generic guidance of the relevant national qualification descriptor.

The *Recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements* provides a means by which cases for the creation of new benchmark statements to cover emerging areas of knowledge within higher education can be made and subsequently developed.

Subject benchmark statements are subject to regular review in order to ensure their continued currency and to reflect nationally agreed good practice. The statements are developed by the relevant academic communities through processes coordinated by QAA and in conjunction with PSRBs and employers where appropriate. Subject benchmark statements therefore establish and/or reflect a consensus within the academic and professional community on the nature and standards of awards. Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject area.

Higher education providers are therefore expected to demonstrate that they have taken account of relevant subject benchmark statements rather than show strict compliance with them.

Further guidelines, references and resources

QAA (2012) *Recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements*
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Recognition-scheme-for-subject-benchmark-statements.aspx

Chapter 2: Degree-awarding bodies' reference points for academic standards

Academic governance arrangements and degree-awarding bodies' academic and regulatory frameworks

Expectation A2

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about degree-awarding bodies' academic and regulatory frameworks, which degree-awarding bodies are required to meet.

Degree-awarding bodies establish comprehensive academic and regulatory frameworks to regulate the awards they make, applying them scrupulously, systematically and consistently to secure academic standards.

Degree-awarding bodies are autonomous and have the freedom to determine which awards and qualifications they confer (consistent with their degree-awarding powers and specific PSRB approvals), whether academic credit will be used, which programmes they will offer, what the individual programme learning outcomes will be and what the associated curriculum and assessment strategy should be to deliver these. In so doing, they operate within a governance framework so that their responsibilities for academic standards and quality are appropriately discharged. The senior academic authority of the degree-awarding body (for example the Senate or Academic Board) determines the governance and management framework for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities and how responsibilities will be delegated. It approves the academic and regulatory frameworks which form the internal reference point for academic standards and the quality assurance procedures which will be used to set and maintain those academic standards. Degree-awarding bodies have mechanisms in place to ensure that decisions on academic standards and quality of learning opportunities are taken separately from those which relate to business and development in order that academic standards are not compromised by business imperatives.

Degree-awarding bodies establish their own academic frameworks (or have in place equivalent enabling provision) which set out what qualifications can be awarded, any defining requirements or characteristics for their design and, if academic credit is used, definitions of the volume and level of credit for those qualifications. Typically, any provision for credit transfer, admission with advanced standing, or recognition of prior learning (RPL) is set out as are any limits on the volume and level of these in order to secure the academic standards of the awards.

Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for determining the assessment processes which will be used to demonstrate the achievement of the intended outcomes of modules and programmes leading to the award of their academic credit and/or qualifications. It is a matter for individual degree-awarding bodies to determine the marking schemes and assessment criteria, and set the academic requirements for progression on a programme and the criteria for the award of a qualification. Degree-awarding bodies also decide whether or not to differentiate student achievement above the threshold (for example whether to classify their bachelor's or integrated master's degrees and whether to award merit or distinction in other qualifications). In order to ensure internal consistency in their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies put in place academic and/or assessment regulations which stipulate threshold academic standards and the basis on which student achievement above the threshold are differentiated within individual awards (for example how degree classifications are decided).

In establishing and maintaining academic frameworks and regulations, degree-awarding bodies take account of a range of external reference points for academic standards including the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) which relate to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, national credit frameworks, and relevant Chapters in Part B of the Quality Code.

Further guidelines, references and resources

ENQA (2009) *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*
[www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf)

Definitive information about individual programmes and awards

Expectation A3

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the production of definitive information about programmes and awards, which degree-awarding bodies are required to meet.

Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme that they approve which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students.

Individual degree-awarding bodies bear the responsibility for demonstrating that appropriate national threshold academic standards have been met and ensuring that there is an unambiguous understanding of the taught programme (or element¹¹) that has been approved through the formally constituted processes (see Chapter 3 below). A definitive record of each programme approved is therefore established and shared with staff and students (including those in any other delivery organisations with whom the degree-awarding body works). This is then used as a reference point for the delivery of the programme by teaching staff, its assessment by internal and external examiners, and in subsequent monitoring and review. Information is recorded both at the level of individual modules and for the programme as a whole. The record is updated as amendments to the programme are made through authorised approval processes and forms the basis for the record of study provided to students. (See also Indicator 6 of Quality Code, Part C: Information about higher education provision.)

For every module or individual unit of learning that leads to the award of credit or contributes to a qualification there is a formal record of its indicative content and structure, its constituent parts, its assessment regime and its intended learning outcomes as approved by the degree-awarding body. This record, which is changed only through due process, serves as a reference point for prospective and current students, academic and support staff involved in enabling student development and achievement, internal and external examiners, QAA reviewers and employers. Higher education providers determine the best ways to produce and disseminate this information for their own intended audiences. (See also Indicator 6 of Quality Code, Part C: Information about higher education provision.)

Where modules or units of learning are combined into a programme of study leading to a qualification, the formal record¹² of the programme sets out the intended learning outcomes

¹¹ This includes taught components of doctoral programmes.

¹² One form of the formal record is a programme specification

and attributes for the programme as a whole. The formal record includes the level on the FHEQ or SCQF at which the qualification is located, and shows how the overall learning outcomes and programme structure are aligned with the qualification descriptors in the FHEQ or FQHEIS and credit frameworks, as appropriate. It also shows clearly how the content and structure of the programme and its assessment strategy provide students with the opportunities for learning and assessment they need to enable them to demonstrate that they have achieved the programme outcomes at the requisite level. There is evidence that, in designing the programme, account has been taken of relevant subject benchmark statements (see Chapter 1, page 6) and the requirements of PSRBs, where applicable. Compliance with the academic and regulatory framework of the degree-awarding body in respect of qualifications is demonstrated and any approved variations are recorded.

Further guidelines, references and resources

QAA (2012) Quality Code, Part C: Information about higher education provision
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-C.aspx

Chapter 3: Processes for setting and maintaining academic standards

The authority and responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards is vested in the senior academic authority (for example the Senate or Academic Board) of the degree-awarding body and the final decision to approve or re-approve a programme, or to confirm an academic award rests with that authority (or other body duly authorised to act on its behalf).

There are three principal processes used by degree-awarding bodies for setting and maintaining academic standards. Each of these is also used to assure the quality of learning opportunities. They are addressed in detail in *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*, *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and recognition of prior learning* and *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code, but their role in the context of standards is summarised here.

Design and approval processes for modules and programmes

Expectation A4

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the approval of programmes and awards, which degree-awarding bodies are required to meet.

Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement rigorous procedures for the approval of programmes which ensure that academic standards are set at least at the UK threshold standard for the qualification and in accordance with their academic frameworks and regulations.

Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for both the design and the approval of academic programmes leading to their awards. Both these functions are key to setting academic standards. Policies and procedures for curriculum design and approval enable degree-awarding bodies to set academic standards by requiring consistency with their own regulatory and academic frameworks. Approval procedures enable degree-awarding bodies to ensure that UK threshold academic standards are set by requiring checks that programmes (whether new or re-approved) meet the Expectation for the UK and European reference points described above. Threshold academic standards are secured by locating each programme at an appropriate level on the FHEQ or the SCQF; ensuring that the proposed learning outcomes are aligned with the relevant qualification descriptor; assigning credit values, where these are used, in alignment with the applicable national credit framework; taking account of any relevant subject benchmark statements; and complying with any other relevant national legislation. Approval processes examine whether the structure and content of the programme ensures that students will be provided with the learning opportunities which will enable them to achieve the programme outcomes and meet the relevant qualification descriptor, and whether the assessment regime adequately tests the intended learning outcomes.

Approval may be granted for a specified period after which re-approval may be required. Where the approval period is open ended, periodic review is used to re-affirm that the threshold academic standards continue to be met in the content and structure of the programme.

See further the Expectation in *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*.

Further guidelines, references and resources

QAA (2011) *Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B1.aspx

Assessment processes

Expectation A5

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about assessment, which higher education providers are required to meet.

Higher education providers operate processes for assessment which ensure that qualifications or credit are awarded only where the learning outcomes have been achieved and where both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree-awarding body have been satisfied.

It is through the assessment process that academic standards are maintained at the appropriate level and that student performance is properly judged against them. For the purposes of the award of credit and/or qualifications, summative assessment is used to give students the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the relevant learning outcomes. In order to ensure that threshold academic standards are met, decisions to award qualifications or credit are based on robust evidence that the relevant module or programme learning outcomes have been achieved. Marking and grading criteria are used by degree-awarding bodies to calibrate levels of achievement relative to the threshold.

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that assessment is conducted with rigour, probity and fairness and with due regard for security in order to secure robust and reliable assessment outcomes and to protect academic standards.

As noted in Chapter 2 above, degree-awarding bodies establish their own regulatory frameworks. Marking schemes, assessment criteria and progression and award criteria are set taking due account of relevant national reference points and the degree-awarding body's own frameworks in order to calibrate student achievement relative to the threshold in a consistent and systematic manner.

Assessment decisions on the award of academic credit and/or qualifications are reached through approved processes and by decisions of formally constituted boards to which responsibility is delegated for determining and approving awards.

See further the Expectation in *Chapter B6: Assessment and recognition of prior learning*.

Further guidelines, references and resources

QAA (2011) *Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment and recognition of prior learning*
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B6.aspx

Monitoring and review processes

Expectation A6

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about monitoring and review of academic standards, which degree-awarding bodies and other higher education providers are required to meet.

Degree-awarding bodies and other higher education providers implement effective procedures for the regular monitoring and periodic review of programmes which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

In order to secure academic standards, degree-awarding bodies monitor programmes regularly and review them periodically to ensure that they are delivered in accordance with what was approved (using the definitive information on the programme as the reference point).

To maintain currency and comparability, degree-awarding bodies monitor and periodically review their academic standards measuring student achievement against UK and international reference points, using qualitative and quantitative management information (for example student progression, completion and achievement data) and other comparative data of their choosing to support these activities.

See further the Expectation in *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*

Further guidelines, references and resources

QAA (2011) *Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B8.aspx

Externality

Expectation A7

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about external involvement in the setting and maintaining of academic standards, which higher education providers are required to meet.

Degree-awarding bodies make full and scrupulous use of:

- **external academic opinion in programme approval and review to confirm that UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and subsequently achieved**
- **external examiners in assessment and award to provide informative comment and recommendations on whether UK threshold academic standards are achieved, that assessment measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme and that the processes of assessment and award have been conducted in accordance with the academic requirements of the degree-awarding body.**

In order to be transparent and publicly accountable for their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards, degree-awarding bodies ensure that external and independent opinion is obtained at key stages of the processes for setting and maintaining academic standards. External academic opinion is sought to verify not only that threshold academic standards are set by rigorous reference to the national (and appropriate European) reference points but also to confirm that the degree-awarding body's internal requirements are being rigorously implemented.

External academic opinion is therefore sought when new programmes are being approved and existing programmes are being reviewed. External examiners are appointed at subject level to provide impartial advice and recommendations as to whether assessment demonstrates that threshold academic standards are achieved and that academic standards relative to the threshold are calibrated in accordance with the degree-awarding body's regulations. See also *Chapter B7: External examining*.

See further Indicator 5 of *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*, Indicator 6 of *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* and the Expectation of *Chapter B7: External examining*.

Further guidelines, references and resources

QAA (2011) *Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B1.aspx

QAA (2011) *Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment and recognition of prior learning*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B6.aspx

QAA (2011) *Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B7.aspx

QAA (2011) *Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B8.aspx

Appendix 1: The Expectations

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectations about setting and maintaining academic standards which higher education providers are required to meet.

Expectation A1

In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland/The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland are met by:

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the framework**
- **ensuring that programme outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the framework**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the guidance**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined learning outcomes**

b) consider and take account of relevant subject benchmark statements

c) if they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the relevant national credit framework.

Expectation A2

Degree-awarding bodies establish comprehensive academic and regulatory frameworks to regulate the awards they make, applying them scrupulously, systematically and consistently to secure academic standards.

Expectation A3

Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme that they approve which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students.

Expectation A4

Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement rigorous procedures for the approval of programmes which ensure that academic standards are set at least at the UK threshold standard for the qualification and in accordance with their academic frameworks and regulations.

Expectation A5

Higher education providers operate processes for assessment which ensure that qualifications or credit are awarded only where the learning outcomes have been achieved and where both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree-awarding body have been satisfied.

Expectation A6

Degree-awarding bodies and other higher education providers implement effective procedures for the regular monitoring and periodic review of programmes which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

Expectation A7

Degree-awarding bodies make full and scrupulous use of:

- external academic opinion in programme approval and review to confirm that UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and subsequently achieved;
- external examiners in assessment and award to provide informative comment and recommendations on whether UK threshold academic standards are achieved, that assessment measures student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme and that the processes of assessment and award have been conducted in accordance with the academic requirements of the degree-awarding body.

Appendix 2: Membership of the advisory group for Part A

Name	Position	Affiliation
Keith Bartlett	Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality)	Norwich University College of the Arts
Sarah Butler	Assistant Director, Research, Development and Partnerships	QAA
Dr Melinda Drowley	Head of Standards, Quality and Enhancement	QAA
Ben Griffith	Education Policy Manager	General Medical Council
Wilma Fee	Director of Academic and Student Affairs	Queens's University, Belfast
Professor Ann Holmes	Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic	University of Wolverhampton
Kate Little	Quality and Student Engagement Consultant	NUS
Professor Clare Mackie	Pro Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning)	University of Sussex
Helen Marshall	Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic and Business Development	University of Glamorgan
Dominic Passfield	Development Officer, Research, Development and Partnerships	QAA
Rowena Pelik	Director of Academic Strategy and Practice	Edinburgh Napier University
Steven Quigley	Academic Registrar	Regent's College
Dr Diana Stammers	Head of Quality	Open University
Tony Turjansky	Head of Academic Quality	Edge Hill University
Keith Zimmerman	Director of Student Administration and Services	Oxford University
Corresponding Members		
Stella Heath	Assistant Director, QAA Scotland	QAA

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