



UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality

Chapter B1: Programme design and approval

Draft for consultation

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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.

Each Chapter 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. 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 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 Chapter where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources.

The Expectation in each Chapter is 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.

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 this Chapter

This publication supersedes the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review* (2006), published by QAA, as it relates to programme design and approval, and forms a Chapter of the Quality Code. Programme monitoring and review are addressed in *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code.

The evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure and consultation on subsequent changes identified the need for the Quality Code which was developed as a result to have a clear structure, based on the student life cycle.⁴ *Chapter B1* addresses the initial development of a programme and processes which lead to a decision by the degree-awarding body that it can be delivered in the agreed form. *Chapter B8* discusses the mechanisms which higher education providers use to reflect on the programme once it is running, and to determine how it can be improved.

⁴ *Changes to the Academic Infrastructure: final report* (June 2011):
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/changes-to-academic-infrastructure.aspx.

Programme design and approval

UK higher education is based on the principle of the autonomy and responsibility of the degree-awarding body for the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of the programmes it offers and the awards it makes. There is no national curriculum for higher education, and higher education providers offer programmes as they see fit within the context of their organisational mission and assessment of likely student demand. This independence is a strength of UK higher education, as it enables higher education providers to offer a variety of programmes reflecting the needs of an increasingly diverse range of students.

The processes of programme design and approval are an essential part of higher education providers' internal quality assurance and enhancement. They ensure that the programmes offered to students make available learning opportunities which enable the intended learning outcomes to be achieved and that appropriate academic standards are set and maintained. This Chapter addresses the operation and effectiveness of those processes. It is relevant for all higher education providers, although ultimate responsibility for the approval of programmes rests with degree-awarding bodies. The extent to which roles and responsibilities for programme design and approval are delegated to the organisations with whom the degree-awarding body works to deliver provision leading to its awards, is defined in the agreement between the organisations (for further detail, see Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards and *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code).

Iterative processes

Programme design and approval depend on reflection and critical self-assessment both by individuals and by higher education providers. Developing a programme is an iterative process, depending on feedback from a range of sources, including other staff, students, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Programme approval involves a number of steps, but there needs to be clarity for all parties involved about the point at which the degree-awarding body definitively approves a programme for delivery.

Higher education provision is dynamic, and programmes are continually evaluated and revised to improve the learning experience for students and to maintain the currency of the curriculum. The themes of this Chapter therefore remain relevant at all stages of the programme life cycle, as part of an integrated approach, but are also closely linked to programme monitoring and review, which are addressed in *Chapter B8* of the Quality Code. The focus of this Chapter is on the design and approval of programmes, either from new or when existing programmes undergo substantial change, which in effect results in a reconsideration of the aims and hence design of the programme. The Chapter is also relevant when a programme is re-approved, if the original approval was for a fixed time period.

Effective processes

UK higher education providers are diverse, and each has processes for programme design and approval which reflect individual missions and goals, while also ensuring the security of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities. These processes are clearly set out in ways which make evident their application to the higher education providers' context. Higher education providers apply their processes systematically and operate them consistently; the processes are capable of being applied to all higher education offered by a provider, but respect differences between subjects, modes and levels of study. Processes are not unduly burdensome or complicated, taking into account an assessment of the risks

involved. Decisions are based on evidence, processes operate in a transparent way, and an appropriate level of resource is applied to ensure the required outcomes of the process are achieved.

Programme design and approval may involve many different organisational and operational departments within the higher education provider, such as academic departments, professional services, and central registry or quality assurance functions. The balance of responsibilities is clearly defined and understood, and all those involved are made aware of the outcomes of decisions.

Fostering creativity and promoting equity

Programme design and approval are opportunities for higher education providers to encourage innovation, alongside a culture of continuous improvement of provision. Programmes may reflect developments in the subject area or in educational research and practice. In setting out criteria to be considered in the design of programmes and testing the fulfilment of these criteria in programme approval, higher education providers take into account the needs of a body of students who reflect the diversity of protected characteristics and prior educational experience, and promote the development of inclusive practice.

Terminology

In this Chapter, as throughout the Quality Code, **programme** is used to describe any stand-alone, approved curriculum followed by a student, which carries academic credit or otherwise contributes to an award of the degree-awarding body. The provision may be of any length or credit value, and includes pre-defined programmes leading to a specific qualification, multidisciplinary programmes, pathways through a modular scheme, short periods of study leading to the award of academic credit, as well as programmes where the specific content is negotiated between the higher education provider and an individual student. In general terms, the Chapter applies to provision at all levels of the national higher education qualifications frameworks. Individual higher education providers determine the extent to which their processes for programme design and approval are applicable to research degree provision, which is considered in more detail in *Chapter B11: Research degrees*, and to other awards which do not carry academic credit.

Where a programme is made up of more than one self-contained, formally structured unit, these units are described as **modules**. Much of this Chapter may also be applied, proportionately as appropriate, to modules in their own right.

Reflecting conventional use within the UK higher education sector, **design** describes the various processes which lead to the creation of a programme, in which the content, modes of delivery, structure and components of the programme, including assessment methods and the means by which students will be engaged with the curriculum, are considered. **Approval** refers to the formal processes by which a degree-awarding body agrees that a programme may be offered for study by students (some higher education providers may use the term validation in these circumstances, or may use validation to refer to the event which forms the end point of the approval process).

Higher education providers may use different terminology to that adopted in this Chapter or use the same terminology in different ways, reflecting their individual history and approach. Higher education providers are clear about how terminology is used within the context of their own processes.

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.

Expectation

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about programme design and approval, which higher education providers are required to meet.

Higher education providers have in place effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.

Indicators of sound practice

The purpose and nature of programme design and approval

Indicator 1

Higher education providers take a strategic approach to the processes for, and outcomes of, programme design and approval.

A strategic approach to programme design and approval considers how proposed provision reflects a higher education provider's mission and strategic goals. Higher education providers promote a shared understanding of their approach to programme design and approval among their staff, students and other stakeholders; this enables those responsible for programme design to take strategic priorities into account. The strategic approach embraces differences between academic disciplines and modes and levels of study. Programme design and approval forms part of the higher education provider's strategic and academic resources planning, within the context of the provider's overall portfolio, including any learning opportunities delivered by others (see further *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others*).

The final decision to approve a programme is fully informed by evidence from analysis of both its business case and its academic merits. Effective reporting structures ensure that both cases are considered in a timely fashion. Higher education providers facilitate integration between the two aspects, for example in relation to findings from market research indicating student interest in a programme or input from employers or professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, but appropriate safeguards are established to protect against competing priorities.

Decision-making

Decisions relating to the processes for and outcomes of programme design and approval are taken at the appropriate level within the higher education provider, and the location of authority is made clear. Decisions are taken independently of those involved in delivering the programme, to ensure objectivity. Where any responsibility is delegated, mechanisms are put in place to monitor the operation of this delegation and to ensure sufficient oversight at an organisational level. When the approval of a programme is dependent on any conditions or recommendations, higher education providers determine how the fulfilment of these will be monitored, including any conditions which are to be met before students are registered on the programme.

Higher education providers consider where efficiency may be improved or duplication reduced by aligning requirements within programme design and approval processes to those of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

Indicator 2

Higher education providers make clear the criteria used for programme design, and the programme approval process tests proposals against these criteria.

The purpose of the programme

Programme design begins with determining the intended purpose(s) of the programme within the context of the higher education provider's strategic approach. These may include

personal, professional, vocational and/or academic development; preparation for knowledge creation and research; or preparation for specific or general employment. Once the purpose of the programme has been established, programme design considers which intended learning outcomes are necessary to achieve that purpose and how students are enabled to achieve these. This takes into account the knowledge, understanding and skills which students are intended to gain, and the level of knowledge, understanding and skills which they are expected to have on entry to the programme. The mechanisms by which students demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes are also planned (see further *Chapter B6: Assessment of students*).

Higher education providers determine the principles which underpin effective programme design within their organisational context, and support staff to understand and engage with them. They determine how programme approval processes ensure that the principles have been reflected within the programme, that sources of good practice in programme design have been drawn upon, including any specified by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and that the appropriate process has been followed. These criteria are also considered where a programme is agreed through negotiation with an individual student.

Programme design and approval processes identify the level of the qualification, its location within the degree-awarding body's internal regulatory framework and the national higher education qualifications framework. Further guidance is available in Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards.

The organisation of the programme

Programme design considers how a programme is organised to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes, in terms of student workload, volume and nature of assessment, progression through the programme and increasing intellectual demand. Within the programme there is a balance between factors such as practical and academic study, modes of study and the use of technology, directed and independent learning, breadth and depth of subject content, and opportunities for personal and academic development. Programme approval processes ensure that the programme as a whole is coherent, in terms of its logic in structure and intellectual integrity, and assessment methods are aligned with the programme content.

Higher education providers promote inclusive practices in learning and teaching. The learning opportunities offered provide every student with opportunities to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The criteria to be considered in programme design and tested in programme approval ensure that the needs of the range of students likely to engage with the programme are taken into account (see further *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching* and *Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement*).

Information about the programme

When a programme is approved, definitive information about it is recorded (see Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards). This includes a clear and informative title for the programme and whether the programme is approved to be delivered for a fixed time period or indefinitely.

Indicator 3

Higher education providers regularly evaluate their processes for programme design and approval and take action to improve them where necessary.

The regular evaluation of processes for programme design and approval is a focus for organisational improvement. Evaluation considers the benefits gained from carrying out the processes and how their outcomes promote enhancement of the student learning experience. It also examines whether processes remain fit for purpose and identifies opportunities for improvement, including in the definition of roles and responsibilities and any delegation of authority. Student views contribute to the evaluation; for example, they are used to reflect on whether the operation of processes takes account of equity of opportunity for all students.

Evaluation highlights good practice, and higher education providers have in place mechanisms to disseminate this, both internally and externally. The evaluation is also an opportunity to learn from practice elsewhere within the higher education sector.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Irish Universities Quality Board (2012) *National Guidelines of Good Practice for the Approval, Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes*

www.iuqb.ie/info/good_practice_guides.aspx?article=4b9d7b37-0b78-4dc9-a577-f423d2524ed0

QAA (2011) *Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2007-09: External involvement in quality management*

www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Outcomes-from-audit-external-involvement.aspx

QAA (2011) *Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2007-09: Managing learning opportunities*

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/outcomes-audit-learning-ops.aspx

Higher Education Statistics Agency (2011) *What is a course?*

www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2353&Itemid=161

Involvement in programme design and approval

Indicator 4

Higher education providers define processes, roles and responsibilities for programme design and approval and communicate these to those who need to be aware of them.

Higher education providers make clear the processes to be followed for the design and approval of programmes. This includes responsibility for initiating and managing the process; indicative, realistic timescales and the criteria on which decisions are taken. Attention is paid to the terminology used, to aid clear understanding. Higher education providers define the respective roles, responsibilities and authority of different bodies involved in programme design and approval, so that those involved are clear about their individual role, the hierarchy of procedures and the location of ultimate responsibility. Responsibility and mechanisms for identifying, disseminating and embedding good practice are also determined.

Higher education providers determine how this information is recorded and communicated. The information is accessible to those who need to know about the processes for programme design and approval, which includes staff and students directly involved in the processes and those who support them, as well as those involved in taking decisions at any

stage of the process, both within and external to the higher education provider (see further Part C: Information about higher education provision).

For circumstances where higher education is provided in association with others, further detail is given in *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others*.

Use of data

Processes include the need to consider relevant management information available within a higher education provider to inform programme design and approval. These data include student performance, feedback from related programmes and other organisational information.

Indicator 5

Higher education providers take account of reference points and draw on expertise from those outside the programme in their processes for programme design and approval.

National and international reference points

Alignment with national and international reference points ensures that the academic standards set for a programme are appropriate. Relevant reference points include the national higher education qualifications frameworks, subject and qualification benchmark statements and the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Processes relating to academic standards are addressed in detail in Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards.

Consideration of reference points also provides a stimulus for creativity and innovation, by suggesting different approaches to the design and delivery of programmes.

Expertise from outside the programme

The involvement of individuals external to the programme in its design and approval fulfils parallel functions to the use of national and international reference points. Within programme approval, individuals external to the higher education provider offer independence and objectivity to the decisions taken. This contributes to the transparency of the process and provides a basis for comparability of academic standards across the higher education sector. In this context, higher education providers ensure that they are able to receive appropriate advice on academic standards from the external individuals involved, together with any other expertise those individuals are able to contribute.

Advice from individuals external to the programme also contributes to enhancement, by providing additional perspectives, including from other higher education providers. External advice provides expertise on current developments both in the subject area and in learning and teaching practices, and is sought from a variety of sources. The range of individuals involved aligns with the objectives of the programme. Individuals able to offer advice include:

- staff within the higher education provider but from a different, though related, subject area
- staff within the higher education provider with professional services expertise, such as educational development, library and learning resources staff and learning technologists

- contacts made through research partnerships, either at other higher education providers or in industry or professional practice
- contacts from academic subject associations and the Higher Education Academy
- representatives of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, whether or not the programme is regulated or accredited
- external examiners (on the role of external examiners in contributing to programme design and approval, see *Chapter B7: External examining*)
- employers
- where higher education is provided in association with others, representatives from the delivery organisation or support provider
- former students.

The nature and extent of external input to programme design and approval is proportionate to the stage of the process or the decision being made. For example, the design of a wholly new programme draws on a wider range of external advice in both design and approval processes than the approval of minor changes to existing provision (see further *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*).

Indicator 6

Higher education providers engage students in programme design and approval processes.

Students are able to make a valuable contribution to their own higher education experience and that of others. In relation to programme design and approval processes, the students involved may have a representative role or may be drawn from the wider student body. Their participation in the processes may be formal or informal. Where any student representative body has a defined role within the process, higher education providers take steps to ensure that their input reflects the views of the student body as a whole, including students with a diversity of protected characteristics. Higher education providers facilitate the contribution of all students involved by providing appropriate training and support.

When new programmes are designed and developed, feedback on generic elements of the programme such as personal development planning is sought from students, as well as feedback from students studying in cognate subject areas. Students may also help in identifying issues relating to equity of opportunity within the programme and to the balance of student workload and assessment across the programme. Higher education providers make clear to students how the proposed new programme fits within the current portfolio.

Student involvement in quality systems is addressed in more detail in *Chapter B5: Student engagement*. Student engagement in learning is addressed further in *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching*.

Indicator 7

Higher education providers enable staff to contribute effectively to programme design and approval by putting in place appropriate arrangements for their support and development.

Programme design and approval processes involve staff from across the higher education provider and from other organisations with whom they work, including academic teaching staff, professional services staff such as educational developers and learning technologists, and quality assurance officers. Higher education providers enable all staff involved to fulfil their role in the process effectively, through opportunities for training and continuing personal

and professional development. Higher education providers may arrange for staff unfamiliar with the processes to work alongside or observe a more experienced colleague, for example through membership of programme approval panels.

As well as recognising the level of engagement, in terms of time and effort, required for effective programme design, higher education providers make available opportunities for staff to work together in designing programmes, so that they are able to draw on collective experience and develop innovative ideas. Once a programme is approved, higher education providers ensure the staff who will be delivering it are supported, in advance of the first students entering the programme. Higher education providers facilitate staff who have not been part of the programme design and approval process but are involved in teaching or supporting student learning on the programme to gain an understanding of the aims, structure and content of the programme.

The continuing professional development of staff who teach and enable student development and achievement is covered in more detail in *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching* and *Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement*.

Further guidelines, references and resources

JISC: Institutional approaches to curriculum design, *The Rough Guide to Curriculum Design*
<http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/file/63018351/The%20Rough%20Guide%20to%20Curriculum%20Design%20Narrative%20Version%20-%20PBFinalEdit%20OJFormattingEdit.pdf>

JISC: Institutional approaches to curriculum design, Viewpoints
<http://wiki.ulster.ac.uk/display/VPR/Home>

JISC: Institutional approaches to curriculum design, Cloudworks
<http://cloudworks.ac.uk/cloudscape/view/1882>

JISC (2012) *Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design: Final Synthesis Report*
<https://files.pbworks.com/download/JilpvLhMpf/jiscdesignstudio/61216296/JISC%20Curriculum%20Design%20Final%20Synthesis%20i1.pdf>

JISC Design Studio: Curriculum Change and Transformation
<http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/57414310/Curriculum%20Change%20and%20Transformation>

Learning Design Support Environment
<https://sites.google.com/a/lkl.ac.uk/ldse/>

The Higher Education Academy (2011) *UK Professional Standards Framework*
www.heacademy.ac.uk/ukpsf

National Union of Students
www.nus.org.uk

sparqs (2012) *A student engagement framework for Scotland*
www.sparqs.ac.uk/section.php?cat=148

WISE: Wales Initiative for student engagement
www.wisewales.com/

National Union of Students: Equality in the curriculum

www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/archived/learning-and-teaching-hub/equalityinthecurriculum/

Appendix 1: The Expectation and Indicators

The Expectation

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about programme design and approval, which higher education providers are required to meet.

Higher education providers have in place effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.

The Indicators of sound practice

Indicator 1

Higher education providers take a strategic approach to the processes for, and outcomes of, programme design and approval.

Indicator 2

Higher education providers make clear the criteria used for programme design, and the programme approval process tests proposals against these criteria.

Indicator 3

Higher education providers regularly evaluate their processes for programme design and approval and take action to improve them where necessary.

Indicator 4

Higher education providers define processes, roles and responsibilities for programme design and approval and communicate these to those who need to be aware of them.

Indicator 5

Higher education providers take account of reference points and draw on expertise from those outside the programme in their processes for programme design and approval.

Indicator 6

Higher education providers engage students in programme design and approval processes.

Indicator 7

Higher education providers enable staff to contribute effectively to programme design and approval by putting in place appropriate arrangements for support and development.

Appendix 2: Membership of the advisory group for this Chapter

Name	Position	Affiliation
Janet Alleyne	Head of Quality Management and Audit Unit	University of Ulster
Harriet Barnes	Development Officer	QAA
Janet Bohrer	Assistant Director	QAA
Dr Richard Brown	Assistant Director of Quality & Standards (Programmes and Awards)	Canterbury Christ Church University
Professor Peter Bullen	Emeritus Professor	University of Hertfordshire
Dr Colleen Connor	Dean of Learning and Teaching	Cardiff Metropolitan University
Tom Evershed	Higher Education Manager	Warwickshire College
Rebecca Freeman	Educational Strategy and Communications Officer	University of Warwick
Dr Richard Kamm	Head of Learning and Teaching Quality, School of Management	University of Bath
Dr Christine Macpherson	Assistant Director	QAA Scotland
Professor Clare Morris	Independent	
Dr Charles Neame	Undergraduate Coordinator	Glasgow School of Art
Aloma Onyemah	Equality and Diversity Officer	Sheffield Hallam University
Nicola Owen	Chief Administrative Officer	Lancaster University
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