Guidance on the use of internal and external benchmarks

1 Introduction

The development of a new course, or revision to an existing course, should be guided by appropriate internal and external reference points, as set out below. Guidance on engagement with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) can be found in the document with that name.

2 Quality Assurance Agency UK Quality Code for Higher Education

2.1 The Quality Code sets out the formal expectations that all providers of higher education are required to meet. It provides a shared starting point for the setting, describing and assuring of academic standards of academic awards and the quality of learning opportunities they provide. Its purpose is:

- to safeguard the academic standards of UK higher education;
- to assure the quality of learning opportunities that UK higher education offers to students;
- to promote continuous and systematic improvement in UK higher education;
- to ensure that information about higher education is publicly available.

2.2 The Quality Code consists of three parts on academic standards, academic quality and information about higher education provision. Each of these is sub-divided into chapters covering specific themes. Each chapter sets out a specific Expectation expressing key matters of principle for assuring academic standards and quality.

2.3 Each chapter of the Quality Code comprises a series of Indicators which higher education providers have agreed reflect sound practice, and through which institutions can demonstrate they are meeting the relevant Expectations. Each Indicator is numbered and is supported by an explanatory note giving more information about the statement’s purpose and context.

2.4 The Quality Code replaced the set of national reference points known as the Academic Infrastructure in 2012-13. The University is considering each new section of the Code against its own policy, and largely colleagues can expect University policy to have been amended if appropriate. It is not expected that individual courses will be developed with direct reference to each of the chapters, however colleagues are encouraged to consider chapters where they appear relevant for their course, as good practice guides.

3 Part A: Setting and maintaining threshold academic standards

3.1 Threshold academic standards are the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. These are

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1 This section is taken from the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk, which also includes full information on all elements of the Quality Code.
3.2 Chapters in Part A cover:

- UK and European reference points for academic standards;
- degree-awarding bodies reference points for academic standards;
- securing academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to academic awards.

4 Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality

4.1 Academic quality is concerned with how well the learning opportunities made available to students enable them to achieve their award. Part B sets out Expectations which higher education providers are required to meet to ensure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided for students; that the learning opportunities provided are monitored; and that providers consider how to improve them.

4.2 Chapters in Part B cover:

- programme design, development and approval;
- recruitment, selection and admission to higher education;
- learning and teaching;
- enabling student development and achievement;
- student engagement;
- the assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning;
- external examining;
- programme monitoring and review;
- academic appeals and student complaints;
- managing higher education provision with others
- research degrees.

5 Part C: Information about higher education provision

Part C sets out the Expectation that higher education providers make available valid, reliable, useful and accessible information about their provision to maintain public confidence and promote understanding of the achievement represented by higher education qualifications.

6 Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and credit and level descriptors

6.1 Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications. The qualifications framework is designed to ensure a consistent use of qualification titles.
6.2 The main purposes of the framework are:

- to enable employers, schools, parents, prospective students and others to understand the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles;
- to maintain international comparability of standards, especially in the European context, to ensure international competitiveness, and to facilitate student and graduate mobility;
- to assist learners to identify potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning;
- to assist higher education institutions, their external examiners, and the Agency's reviewers, by providing important points of reference for setting and assessing standards.

6.3 All courses (except MPhil/PhD) are credit bearing, as set out in the Common Academic Framework\(^2\). The CAF principles relating to credit and level are designed in accordance with the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), and the principles of the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC). Course development teams may also find SEEC definitions of credit level a useful reference point: [http://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf](http://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf)

6.4 The table below summarises the qualification and credit levels in use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification descriptors</th>
<th>Levels</th>
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| Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), QAA | Doctoral Masters Level 8  
Bachelor with Honours Foundation Certificate Level 6  
| Level 5  
Level 4 |
| National Qualifications Framework (NQF), regulated by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority | Level 3 Advanced  
Level 2 Intermediate  
Level 1 Foundation Entry  
| Level 3  
Level 2  
Level 1  
Entry |

7 Subject benchmark statements

7.1 Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject.

7.2 Working closely with the sector, QAA has published subject benchmark statements for a range of disciplines to clearly set out the academic characteristics and standards of UK programmes.

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\(^2\) A copy is available on the [Quality Assurance and Enhancement](http://www.staffcentral) website on staffcentral.
7.3 Subject benchmark statements 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 established by an academic subject community.

7.4 Subject benchmark statements are intended to assist those involved in programme design, delivery and review. They may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a subject area.

7.5 Subject benchmark statements are available at the following links:

Honours degrees
www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Honours-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx

Master's degrees
www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Master%27s-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx

8 Foundation Degree benchmark statement

8.1 The Foundation Degree qualification benchmark is designed to be used as a reference point in setting and assessing standards for foundation degrees. It is not intended to be prescriptive or to regulate but to describe the distinctive features of a Foundation Degree in terms of its purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes.

The full statement can be found at the following link:
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degreequalification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx

9 Programme specifications

9.1 A programme specification is a concise description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher education programme, and the means by which these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated. QAA has produced guidelines to offer help and guidance to those preparing programmes specifications. They draw on the experience of others in a range of disciplines and institutions who have already prepared programme specifications.

9.2 A programme specification should identify potential stopping-off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:

- The knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;
- Key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;
- Cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;
- Subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills. The Committee considered that programme specifications 'could usefully replace some of the prospectus material that is presently produced'.
Further information on the development and use of programme specifications can be found in Chapter A3 of the Code.

The University has adopted the principle that all courses are covered by programme specifications, and during the course development process a programme specification should be used at all stages in development, until its completion after validation.

All programme specifications are accessible on staffcentral. A more detailed summary can be found at the following link:

http://staffcentral.brighton.ac.uk/progspecs/default.shtm

10 Regulations

10.1 The General Examination and Assessment Regulations for Taught Courses\(^3\) (GEAR) outline the regulations by which all taught courses which lead to an award of the University are governed, and includes the University Assessment Policy. All courses offered by the University must comply with GEAR.

10.2 Some exceptions to these regulations are permitted when approved at validation, with the approval of the Chair of Academic Board. Exceptions are normally only approved where a Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirement needs to be taken into account. Examples of exceptions to GEAR include the following regulatory areas: the minimum pass and threshold mark, the extent of compensation at the end of a stage, the maximum amount of credit which can be awarded through accreditation of prior achievement at level 7, and the number of credits a student can trail. If the validation panel agrees that the exception would be appropriate, the chair of the panel should write to the chair of the Academic Board, via the secretary to the Board, recommending that the exception be granted.

10.3 Course specific regulations must also be developed during the course development process and approved through validation. Regulatory framework requirements for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate courses can be found in section B of GEAR.

11 University policies

11.1 The University has developed a range of policies and strategies in order to support its activity, these relate to academic, financial, staff and student matters. A full list of these can be found at the following link:

http://staffcentral.brighton.ac.uk/xpedio/groups/Public/documents/staffcentral/doc003661.pdf

Those policies that are most likely to have a direct bearing on the development of new courses include:

i) Common Academic Framework;

ii) General Examination and Assessment Regulations for Taught Courses;

\(^3\) A copy of GEAR is available on the Assessment and Examinations webpage on the Quality Assurance and Enhancement website on staffcentral.
iii) Assessment Policy;
iv) Learning and Teaching Strategy;
v) E-Learning Strategy;
vi) Research-Informed Teaching;
vii) Education for Sustainable Development
viii) Widening Participation Strategy;
ix) Admissions Policy;
x) Personal Tutoring Policy;
xii) University of Brighton policy and guidance on foundation degrees.

12 Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton

12.1 The University of Brighton Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) supports the professional development of academic staff across the University. The CLT works on several levels - with individuals and groups of staff, with schools and through contributing to institutional and national policy.

For further information on the CLT, please see the website at:

http://www.brighton.ac.uk/clt/

13 Higher Education Academy

13.1 The Higher Education Academy's role is to be a nationwide focus for enhancing teaching, learning and students' experiences in higher education. It works with institutions, discipline groups and individual staff within the four countries of the UK. For further information on the HEA and its work, please see the Academy’s website at: www.heacademy.ac.uk/.