



UK Quality Code for Higher Education

**Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic
Standards**

PART
A

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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 students and the general public can expect of them. The Quality Code covers all four nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) 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.

The Quality Code has three Parts. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards contains three Chapters and seven Expectations. Each of the 11 Chapters of Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality, and Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision contain a single Expectation. An Expectation 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 respective Chapter or Part. 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

The Expectations in Part C and each Chapter of Part B 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 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. There are no Indicators in Part A. The explanatory text provided directly supports the relevant Expectation.

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. 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. A more detailed glossary is available on QAA's website.⁴

The Quality Code and legislation

Higher education providers are 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.

Equality and diversity in the Quality Code

The Quality Code promotes an inclusive approach by embedding consideration of equality and diversity matters throughout. Promoting equality involves treating everyone with equal dignity and worth, irrespective of the group or groups to which they belong, while also raising aspirations and supporting achievement for people with diverse requirements, entitlements and backgrounds. An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, for example, because of a declared disability, specific cultural background, location or age, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Higher education providers, staff and students all have a role in and responsibility for promoting equality.

Equality of opportunity involves enabling access for people who have differing individual requirements as well as eliminating arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to learning. In addition, disabled students and non-disabled students are offered learning opportunities that are equally accessible to them, by means of inclusive design wherever possible and by means of reasonable individual adjustments wherever

necessary. Offering an equal opportunity to learn is distinguished from every student having an equal chance of success, because this is dependent on a range of factors including their motivation and engagement in learning.

All higher education providers have legal obligations which they must meet, for example in relation to equality of opportunity and eliminating unlawful discrimination (in the UK particular considerations, such as the anticipatory duty to provide reasonable adjustments, apply to disabled students). The Quality Code does not seek to duplicate or interpret these requirements.

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: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards of the Quality Code explains how academic standards are set and maintained for higher education qualifications in the UK. The frameworks, statements and guidance concerned with academic standards constitute formal components of Part A, which explains how these components relate to each other and how collectively they provide an integrated context for setting and maintaining academic standards in higher education. Part A sets out what is expected of degree-awarding bodies in setting, delivering and maintaining the academic standards of the awards that they make. Delivery organisations working with degree-awarding bodies do not carry the same responsibilities for academic standards but need to understand how academic standards are set and maintained in UK higher education. The specific role of a delivery organisation in relation to academic standards is set out in the formal agreement with its degree-awarding body. See further Chapter *B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

Part A comprises three Chapters: *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards*, *Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards* and *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*.

Chapter A1 now formally incorporates, and places in an explanatory context, the following QAA publications as constituent components of this Part of the Quality Code:

- the UK national frameworks for higher education qualifications (*The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland*), that set out the different qualification levels and national expectations of standards of achievement
- guidance on qualification characteristics
- the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*
- *The Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Guidance on Academic Credit Arrangements in Higher Education in England*
- Subject Benchmark Statements which set out the nature and characteristics of degrees (generally bachelor's with honours) and the outcomes graduates are expected to achieve in specific subject areas.

Links to the current versions of these components are provided within the text of *Chapter A1*. *Chapter A2* supersedes the *Guidelines for Preparing Programme Specifications* which are now replaced by Expectation A2.2.

Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality of the Quality Code sets out in detail the processes in which all higher education providers engage in order to set, deliver and maintain academic standards, and to assure and enhance the quality of learning opportunities. *Chapter A3* of Part A therefore refers to specific Chapters in Part B for more detailed information on the processes of programme approval and review, assessment and the use of external expertise.

Part A was subject to public consultation during June and July 2013 and was published in October 2013. It became a reference point for the purposes of reviews carried out by QAA from August 2014.

External links

Higher education providers are responsible for ascertaining which laws and regulations apply to them. To meet the Expectations of this Part 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 a Royal Charter, Papal Bull (in Scotland), an Act of Parliament or, since 1992, by Order of the Privy Council (a formal body of advisors to the Queen).⁵ QAA provides confidential advice (after detailed scrutiny) to the Privy Council on applications for degree awarding powers. This right to award UK degrees is legally protected⁶ and only those bodies recognised by the UK authorities for this purpose may award their own degrees. Those organisations granted the authority to award higher education degrees are referred to as Recognised Bodies. A full list of these is published by the UK Government's Department for Business, Innovation & Skills.⁷

A degree-awarding body may or may not have university title (although all universities have degree awarding powers). The granting of university title is a separate process.⁸

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 A1*). 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 A1*). These powers are granted indefinitely to providers that are part of the publicly funded higher education sector⁹ 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 A1*). These powers are granted indefinitely to degree-awarding bodies that 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 A1*) also derives from these powers.

Throughout Part A, the term 'degree-awarding bodies' refers collectively to providers with powers in any of the above three categories.

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 qualifications, 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 awards of credit and qualifications and have the responsibility for setting and maintaining the academic standards of those awards.

Definitions of academic standards

Threshold academic standards are the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic qualification or credit. For equivalent qualifications, 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 A1*).

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

Threshold academic standards define the minimum standards which degree-awarding bodies must use to make the award of qualifications at a particular level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications (for instance, a foundation degree, or a doctoral degree). Threshold academic standards are distinct from the standards of performance that a student needs to demonstrate to achieve a particular classification of a qualification (for example a first class honours degree classification in a particular subject or the award of merit or distinction in a master's degree). These standards of performance are the academic standards for which individual degree-awarding bodies are responsible as described further in *Chapter A2*.

Individual degree-awarding bodies are responsible for ensuring that UK threshold academic standards are met in their qualifications by aligning programme learning outcomes with the relevant qualification descriptors in the national frameworks for higher education qualifications. They are also responsible for defining their own academic standards by setting the pass marks and determining the grading/marketing schemes and any criteria for classification of qualifications that differentiate between levels of student achievement above and below the threshold academic standards. The primary focus of Part A is on how UK threshold academic standards are set and maintained.

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. They are a diverse group of organisations in terms of their status, authority and their roles in higher education to approve, recognise or accredit higher education programmes.

Statutory bodies and regulators (for example, the General Medical Council) have powers mandated by Parliament to regulate a profession or group of professions and protect the use of professional titles. Where professions are regulated by statute, registration to practise for UK graduates may be restricted to those of programmes accredited by the respective regulator. In some cases, the Act of Parliament in the regulation of the profession may restrict the type of academic qualifications that may be recognised for registration (for example the *Dentists Act 1984*).

Statutory and regulatory bodies which set professional standards may have national regulatory responsibilities (for example, the Law Society of Scotland) or UK-wide responsibilities (for example, the Nursing and Midwifery Council). Some statutory and regulatory bodies accredit or recognise higher education programmes overseas, allowing professional recognition or registration for individuals to practise in the UK. Others make separate arrangements for non-UK graduates who wish to practise in the UK. There are regulators involved in the accreditation of UK higher education programmes that operate at a European level (for example, the European Academy of Chiropractic) and at a wider international level (for example, the American Veterinary Medical Associations). Some statutory and regulatory bodies are required to comply with relevant European legislation on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications.

Professional bodies are independent membership organisations that oversee the activities of a particular profession and represent the interests of its members. They may offer registration or certification of unregulated occupations on a voluntary basis. Some professional bodies are incorporated by Royal Charter (for instance, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors) and, like regulatory bodies, work in the interest of the public. Some UK professional bodies are global membership organisations and recognise or accredit higher education programmes in many countries, including UK transnational education. Higher education providers may choose to have their programmes accredited so their graduates can access routes to professional status and to demonstrate the relevance of their programmes to business

and industrial needs and professional standards. Accreditation of higher education programmes by professional bodies may grant award holders eligibility for professional registration (subject to any additional requirements set by the regulator), or provide a prerequisite for qualified or chartered status/professional title with or without further professional development, or provide exemptions to the usual requirements for professional qualification.

Professional qualifications (as distinct from academic qualifications) are determined and may be awarded by PSRBs for professional certification and continuing professional development. The PSRB is responsible for the standards of the professional certification. These qualifications may be delivered through or in conjunction with higher education programmes or as separate programmes in their own right. Standards set by PSRBs in this context may be national or international.

Where degree-awarding bodies choose to offer programmes which fulfil the requirements of a PSRB, the relevant PSRB will influence the design of academic programmes, and may even influence the approval, monitoring and review of programmes. However, the responsibility for the academic standards remains with the degree-awarding body which is awarding the academic qualification.

See also *Chapter A1* for how PSRBs contribute to Subject Benchmark Statements.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Concerning powers, rights and duties of further and higher education providers, and of degree-awarding bodies:

Further and Higher Education Act (1992)
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13/contents

Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act (1992)
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/37/contents

Concerning lawful UK degrees:

Sections 214 to 217 of the *Education Reform Act (1988)*
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/part/IV/crossheading/unrecognised-degrees

Department of Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS): *Recognised UK degrees*
www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees

The Education (Recognised Bodies) (England) Order 2010
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/2618/contents/made

The Education (Recognised Bodies) (Scotland) Order 2007
www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2007/557/contents/made

The Education (Recognised Bodies) (Wales) Order 2012
www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2012/1260/contents/made

The Education (Recognised Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 2005
www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2005/522/contents/made

The Education (Listed Bodies) (England) Order (2010)
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/2614/contents/made

The Education (Listed Bodies) (Scotland) Order (2004)
www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2004/539/contents/made

The Education (Listed Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order (2004)
www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2004/480/contents/made

The Education (Listed Bodies) (Wales) Order (2012)
www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2012/1259/contents/made

Concerning the use of the university title:

Teaching and Higher Education Act (1998)
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/30/contents

Section 49 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act (1992)*
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/37/section/49

BIS (2004) *Applications for the Grant of Taught Degree Awarding Powers, Research Degree Awarding Powers and University Title. Guidance for Applicant Organisations in England and Wales*
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32388/11-781-applications-for-degree-awarding-powers-guidance.pdf

BIS (2010) *Applications for the Grant of Foundation Degree-Awarding Powers. Guidance for Applicant Organisations in England and Wales*
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32389/11-782-applications-for-foundation-degree-awarding-powers-guidance.pdf

BIS (2010) *Companion Guide for Foundation Degree Awarding Powers*
www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/c/11-783-companion-guide-foundation-degree-awarding-powers.pdf

Concerning professional, statutory and regulatory bodies:

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

HESA: List of accrediting bodies
www.hesa.ac.uk/component/option.com_studrec/task.show_file/Itemid.233/mnl.12061/href.accreditation_list.html/

QAA: Professional bodies - The PSRB Forum
www.qaa.ac.uk/partners/professional-bodies

Responsibilities of non degree-awarding bodies

Degree-awarding bodies often work with other providers (delivery organisations or support providers) that do not have degree awarding powers to deliver provision which leads to the award of a higher education qualification or academic credit of the degree-awarding body. Where this happens, degree-awarding bodies are responsible for setting the academic standards and are responsible for maintaining those academic standards regardless of where the learning opportunities are delivered or who provides them. Delivery organisations that work with degree-awarding bodies are responsible for delivering modules or programmes of study and maintaining the academic standards of the degree-awarding body. The operational implementation of certain functions related to academic standards (for example assessment) may be delegated to these delivery organisations which are then accountable to the degree-awarding body for discharging them appropriately and for operating in accordance with the academic frameworks and regulations approved by the relevant degree-awarding body (see *Chapter A2* and *Chapter A3*). In some instances, the degree-awarding body may have approved separate academic frameworks and/or regulations for an individual delivery organisation. In these circumstances, the delivery organisation is responsible for contributing to the review of regulations and recommending changes for approval by the degree-awarding body.

Degree-awarding bodies' responsibility for the academic standards of all credit and qualifications awarded in its name is never delegated. Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for defining and recording, in a written agreement for each specific arrangement, the specific functions delegated to a delivery organisation and the individual and shared roles, responsibilities and obligations of each party. See *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

All delivery organisations or support providers that work with a degree-awarding body are required to engage with the Quality Code and to meet the relevant Expectations.

The Listed Bodies Order is a Statutory Instrument which records providers that do not have the power to award their own degrees, but provide full programmes that lead to a foundation, bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree of a Recognised Body. The Department of Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) maintains the Listed Bodies Order.

Further guidelines, references and resources

BIS: *Recognised UK Degrees*
www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees

BIS: *Listed Bodies*
www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees#listed-bodies

Chapter A1 - UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards

Reference points are collectively agreed requirements or points of comparison (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 for academic standards, 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 relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

National qualifications frameworks for higher education

National qualifications frameworks

National qualifications frameworks are formal structures which are adopted by countries to define their qualification systems. Generally they identify qualification levels in ascending order and state the generic 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. They describe a continuum of learning which allows any new qualifications to be placed within the educational system. They are a tool both for securing threshold academic standards nationally and for making valid comparisons of qualifications internationally (thus facilitating student mobility).

An outcomes-based approach to qualifications

The fundamental premise of qualifications frameworks in Europe is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of positively defined learning outcomes (demonstrated through assessment

against a standard) rather than duration of study. Learning outcomes are a statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning.

UK frameworks for higher education qualifications

There are two parallel UK national frameworks for higher education: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS), which apply to the respective UK jurisdictions.

The frameworks define, and apply to, all higher education qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies. These are the foremost national reference points for threshold academic standards in UK higher education, and all degree-awarding bodies are expected to comply with their specifications.

The frameworks for higher education qualifications are supported and contextualised by Subject Benchmark Statements. These national frameworks are maintained by QAA which is also responsible for quality assuring their use. Current versions¹⁰ of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are available at:

QAA (2008) *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Framework-Higher-Education-Qualifications-08.pdf

QAA (2014) *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland*
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2674

Framework levels and qualification descriptors

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 require 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 relevant framework for higher education qualifications, ensure that programme outcomes are aligned with the relevant qualification descriptor, and that the frameworks' requirements in respect of awarding and naming qualifications are met.

UK higher education qualifications frameworks and institutional reviews

Qualifications frameworks have credibility when the bodies awarding the qualifications undergo regular quality assurance. QAA conducts reviews of all UK degree-awarding bodies and publishes the findings in its reports.¹¹ All reviews include an assessment of how degree-awarding bodies use the FHEQ or FQHEIS as a reference point in discharging their degree awarding powers. Degree-awarding bodies have to demonstrate how they align the intended learning outcomes of their awards with the relevant levels as denoted by the qualification descriptor in the FHEQ or FQHEIS (as applicable). QAA reviews consider how degree-awarding bodies demonstrate that 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 qualification descriptors and other requirements of the frameworks (see *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval*, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*).

QAA reviews also consider how the UK frameworks are used by degree-awarding bodies to assure themselves that the achievement of students is of an academic standard that meets or exceeds the threshold standards set out in the relevant qualifications framework (see *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*).

In these ways, 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.

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 overarching 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). 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 Edexcel.¹² 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 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 F-EHEA) and their compatibility with it has been formally verified. The UK is part of the intergovernmental initiative, commonly referred to as the Bologna Process. The aims of the Bologna Process are to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to make Europe's higher education systems more transparent, thus facilitating international recognition of qualifications and creating opportunities for increased student and graduate mobility.

The QF-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 required¹³ 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 QF-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) *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/en/Publications/Documents/Bologna-Process-in-HE.pdf

QAA: Bologna self-certification: Scotland

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Verification-of-compatibility-Scottish-FQHE.pdf

A European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) has also been agreed by the European Commission (covering all education and training awards in Europe). The FHEQ and FQHEIS are compatible with this framework.

Guidance on qualification characteristics

QAA publishes guidance on the characteristics of certain qualifications:

QAA (2011) *Doctoral Degree Characteristics*

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Doctoral_Characteristics.pdf

QAA (2010) *Master's Degree Characteristics*

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Masters-degree-characteristics.pdf

QAA (2010) *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.pdf

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 master's programmes. Degree-awarding bodies consider and take account of these characteristics.

The *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* identifies the distinctive features of the foundation degree (at level five of the FHEQ) that are not necessarily present in other qualifications at that level. It describes the qualification in terms of its particular purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes, but it does not include subject-level detail. Degree-awarding bodies consider and take account of the specifications of this benchmark.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)

www.cqfw.net

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

www.scqf.org.uk

Office of Qualification and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual): Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)

www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean

Ofqual: National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

<http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/qualification-frameworks/>

Ofqual

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual

QAA (2011) *Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries - A Guide to Comparing Qualifications in the UK and Ireland*

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=165

European Commission: *The Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education: An Explanation*

www.fulbright.at/fileadmin/user_upload/studyAustria/bologna.pdf

Bologna Process-European Higher Education Area

www.ehea.info

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

www.engq.eu

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

www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=65

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/en/Publications/Documents/Verification-of-the-compatibility-of-The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England--Wales-and-Northern-Irel.pdf

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/en/Publications/Documents/Verification-of-compatibility-of-the-framework-for-qualifications-of-higher-education-institutions-in-Scotland-with-the-fr.pdf

The European Qualifications Framework

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/lfp/funding/2007/call_eqf_2007.php

International Unit (2011) *The UK Doctorate: Policy Positions in the European Context*

www.international.ac.uk/media/1537702/UK%20Doctorate%20-%20Policy%20Positions%20in%20a%20European%20Context%20-%20Nov%202011.pdf

Bologna Seminar (2004) *Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society (the Salzburg principles)*

www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/Salzburg_Report_final.1129817011146.pdf

EUA Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) publications

www.eua.be/cde/publications.aspx

Research Councils UK (2013) *Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training*

www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/researchcareers/statementofexpectation.pdf

Department for Employment and Learning (2012) *Graduating to Success, A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland*

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

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 proxy measure of learning outcomes and allows the volume and level of outcomes to be described for qualifications. Credit frameworks typically define credit volumes and levels associated with particular qualifications, both in terms of the minimum numbers of credits comprising the programme and the minimum number of credits pitched at the level of the qualification (the exit level). Credit frameworks are therefore threshold reference points for those designing and approving academic programmes where credit is awarded, and bring consistency of approach to the use of credit.

UK credit frameworks

Both Scotland and Wales have overarching, integrated credit and qualifications frameworks 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 taught curricula and have done so for many years.

Credit is not, however, universally used for programmes in some vocational subjects, such as medicine and veterinary science. The majority of research degrees are not credit-based.

The *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Guidance on Academic Credit Arrangements in Higher Education in England*¹⁴ 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 for higher education programmes 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/en/Publications/Documents/Academic-Credit-Framework.pdf

While the discussion of credit differs in the frameworks used in the different jurisdictions of the UK, its application is underpinned by principles which are common to them all. 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 assessment). 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 strategic approaches to teaching and learning, and the characteristics of the associated student groups. Credit frameworks potentially facilitate the transfer of credit between programmes and between higher education providers 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 with advanced standing and exemption from part of a programme.

See also *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education* and *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning* for more detailed information on the transfer of credit between degree-awarding bodies and the recognition of prior learning.

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 QF-EHEA identifies ranges of ECTS credit points associated with its qualification cycles. The verification of national qualifications frameworks to the QF-EHEA has 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 credit points rather than using the credit system set out in *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/en/Publications/Documents/Academic-credit-in-higher-education-in-England---an-introduction.pdf

QAA (2008) *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications and Credit: How They Relate to Academic Standards*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/The-frameworks-for-higher-education-qualifications-and-credit-how-they-relate-to-academic-standards.pdf

The UK Credit Forum
www.seec.org.uk/the-uk-credit-forum/

South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
www.seec.org.uk/

Nothern Universities Consortuim
www.nuc.ac.uk/

QAA (2009) *Joint Forum for Higher levels: Overarching Principles and Operational Criteria for a Common Approach to Credit*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Joint-Forum-Higher-Levels-April-2009.pdf

UK HE Europe Unit (2009) *UK HE Europe Unit Guidance on the Relationship between UK Arrangements for Academic Credit and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)*
www.international.ac.uk/media/1438457/E-09-06.pdf

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)
http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/ects_en.htm

UK Higher Education International Unit (2011) *The UK Doctorate: Policy Positions in the European Context*
www.international.ac.uk/media/1537702/UK%20Doctorate%20-%20Policy%20Positions%20in%20a%20European%20Context%20-%20Nov%202011.pdf

QAA (2011) *Doctoral Degree Characteristics*
www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Doctoral_Characteristics.pdf

Subject Benchmark Statements

Subject Benchmark Statements make explicit the nature and characteristics of qualifications 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 professions
- 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/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements

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 learning 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 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, the aims and scope of programmes vary and may not fall clearly within the scope of a single Subject Benchmark Statement. More than one Statement may be relevant to a programme or the programme may lie 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
- are developed by the relevant academic communities through processes coordinated by QAA and in conjunction with PSRBs and employers where appropriate
- establish and/or reflect a consensus, therefore, within the academic and professional community on the nature and standards of qualifications
- may also be of interest to prospective students and employers seeking information about the nature and standards of qualifications in a given subject area.

Higher education providers are therefore expected to demonstrate that they have considered and 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/en/Publications/Documents/Recognition-scheme-for-subject-benchmark-statements.pdf

Chapter A2 - Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards

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

Expectation A2.1

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

In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

Academic governance arrangements

Degree-awarding bodies are autonomous and have the freedom to determine which qualifications they confer (consistent with their degree awarding powers and specific legal requirements for qualifications in certain professions), whether academic credit will be used, which programmes they will offer, what the individual programme learning outcomes will be and what the associated learning, teaching and assessment strategy should be to deliver these. In so doing, they operate within a governance framework which ensures that their responsibilities for academic standards and quality are appropriately discharged. 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. This senior academic authority determines the governance and management framework for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities and how operational functions will be delegated. It approves the academic frameworks and regulations which form the internal reference point for academic standards and the quality assurance procedures which will be used to maintain those academic standards. The final decision to approve or re-approve a programme, or to confirm the award of a qualification to a student rests with the degree-awarding body's senior academic authority or other body authorised to act on its behalf. 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 (though they may run in parallel) in order that academic standards are not compromised by business imperatives.

Academic frameworks

Degree-awarding bodies establish their own academic frameworks (or have in place equivalent enabling provision) for both taught programmes and research degrees which set out what qualifications can be awarded, any defining requirements or characteristics for their design and, where academic credit is used, definitions of the volume and level of credit for those qualifications. These are consistent with the requirements of the relevant national frameworks for higher education qualifications and the relevant national credit framework if UK credit is awarded. 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 their awards.

Academic frameworks are systematically and consistently applied to secure academic standards (see *Chapter A3*).

Academic or assessment regulations

Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for determining the assessment processes which will be used to demonstrate the achievement of the intended learning 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 or grading schemes to be used for the assessment criteria, and to set the academic requirements for progression on a programme and the criteria for the award of a qualification (taking due account of the relevant national reference points).

Degree-awarding bodies also decide whether or not to differentiate student achievement above and below the threshold (for example whether to classify their bachelor's or integrated master's degrees, whether to use a grade point average, 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 their threshold academic standards (the criteria for the award of a qualification), any requirements for progression within programmes, and the basis on which student achievement above or below the threshold is differentiated within individual qualifications (for example how degree classifications are decided). See also *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*.

These regulations are systematically and consistently applied to secure academic standards (see *Chapter A3*) and are regularly reviewed and maintained. In establishing and maintaining their 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 which relate to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, guidance on qualification characteristics, national credit frameworks, and Chapters in Part B of the Quality Code.

Degree-awarding bodies' academic frameworks and regulations are accessible to all intended audiences.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Companies Act (2006)

www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/46/contents

Equality Act 2010

www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations

www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2011/2260/contents/made

Equality Challenge Unit (2009) Governing Bodies: Equality and Diversity

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/governing-bodies-equality-and-diversity

Equality Challenge Unit (2011) Public Sector Equality Duty: Specific Duties for England

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/public-sector-equality-duty-specific-duties-for-england/

Equality Challenge Unit (2011) The Public Sector Equality Duty: Specific Duties for Wales

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/the-public-sector-equality-duty-specific-duties-for-wales/

Equality Challenge Unit (2010) Anti-Discrimination Law in Northern Ireland

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/anti-discrimination-law-in-northern-ireland

ENQA (2009) Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG_3edition-2.pdf

Committee of University Chairs (2009) Guide for Members of Higher Education Governing Bodies in the UK

www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/1/pubs/hefce/2009/0914/09_14.pdf

Committee of University Chairs (2011) Guide for Members of Higher Education Governing Bodies. Supplementary Guide Regarding the Role of University Governing Bodies in Relation to Students' Unions

www.nusconnect.org.uk/pageassets/goodgovernance/guidance/CUC-Guide_March2011.pdf

Committee of Scottish Chairs (2013) The Scottish Code of Good HE Governance. Governance Code and Supporting Guidelines for Members of the Governing Bodies of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland

www.scottishuniversitygovernance.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/FINAL-draft-code-12April13.pdf

Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators: Resources

www.icsa.org.uk/resources

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) Governance

www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/audiences/governance-new/index.cfm

QAA (2011) Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2007-09: Managing Academic Standards

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Outcomes-institutional-audit-2007-9-academic-standards.pdf

Definitive records of individual programmes and qualifications

Expectation A2.2

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the maintenance of a definitive record of each programme and qualification, which degree-awarding bodies are required to meet.

Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) 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 and alumni.

Individual degree-awarding bodies bear the responsibility for demonstrating that appropriate national threshold academic standards are set and maintained and for ensuring that there is an unambiguous understanding of the taught programme or research degree that has been approved through formally constituted processes (see *Chapter A3*).¹⁵ A definitive record of each programme or qualification approved and its intended learning outcomes is therefore maintained and the information shared with staff and students (including those in any other delivery organisations with whom the degree-awarding body works). The definitive record is then used as the reference point for the delivery of the programme by teaching staff/research supervisors, its assessment by internal and external examiners, and in subsequent monitoring and review. Information is recorded both at the level of any individual modules and for the programme as a whole. The records are updated as and when any amendments to the programme or qualification, or its learning outcomes, are made through authorised approval processes and form the source for the record of study provided to students. (See also 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 scheme and its intended learning outcomes as approved by the degree-awarding body.

Where modules or units of learning are combined into a taught programme of study leading to a qualification (or a taught or structured component of a research degree), the definitive record of the programme (or component) sets out the intended learning outcomes and attributes for the programme as a whole. The definitive record:

- includes the level on the FHEQ or SCQF at which the qualification is located
- shows how the overall learning outcomes are aligned with the qualification descriptors in the FHEQ or FQHEIS
- shows how the programme structure is consistent with the relevant UK credit frameworks where UK credit is awarded
- 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 learning outcomes at the requisite level
- evidences that, in designing the programme, account has been taken of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements (see *Chapter A1*) and the requirements of PSRBs, where applicable
- demonstrates compliance with the academic framework and regulations of the degree-awarding body (see Expectation A2.1)
- includes any approved variations or subsequent changes (see *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review*).

The definitive records for research degrees comprise different types of information but, at a minimum, include the subject or interdisciplinary area approved to offer research degree programmes (see *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*), the types of qualification approved in that area and the level on

the FHEQ or SCQF at which they are located together with the definitive record of any taught or structured component. Definitive records can assume a variety of forms of which the programme specification is one. It is the responsibility of the degree-awarding body to determine the preferred format.

The definitive record, which is changed only through due process, serves as a reference point for academic and support staff involved in delivering the programme and enabling student development and achievement, internal and external examiners, and QAA reviewers. Higher education providers determine the best ways to produce and disseminate information derived from these records for their various audiences such as prospective and current students and employers (see *Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision*).

Further guidelines, references and resources

Higher Education Achievement Report
www.hear.ac.uk/

European Commission: The Diploma Supplement
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/doc/ds_en.pdf

Vitae (2011) *Researcher Development Statement*
www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Researcher%20development%20statement.pdf

Vitae: Researcher Development Statement endorsements
www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework/vitae-researcher-development-statement-endorsements

Chapter A3 - Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

There are four principal ways in which degree-awarding bodies secure academic standards and quality assure the learning outcomes-based approach to academic awards in the UK, which are addressed in this Chapter. When QAA conducts reviews of degree-awarding bodies in order to quality assure providers awarding higher education qualifications (see the section 'Higher education qualifications frameworks and institutional review' in *Chapter A1*), review teams assess the extent to which degree-awarding bodies execute these processes effectively.

Design and approval of modules, programmes and qualifications

Expectation A3.1

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

Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.

Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for the formal approval of academic programmes leading to their awards, a key function in setting academic standards. *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees* address the processes in detail. The ways in which these processes are used to secure academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to awards are summarised below.

Degree-awarding bodies ensure through rigorous formal programme approval that programmes meet or exceed UK threshold academic standards by requiring checks that programmes meet Expectation A1 and, in the case of research degrees, meet the Expectation of *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*. UK threshold academic standards are secured by locating each programme at the appropriate level of the FHEQ or the SCQF; ensuring that the proposed learning outcomes are aligned with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications; taking account of guidance on qualification characteristics; assigning credit values, where UK credit is awarded, in alignment with the applicable UK credit framework; and taking account of any relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

Degree-awarding bodies' policies for curriculum design and development enable them to set their own academic standards above the threshold. Formal approval processes ensure that these are appropriately set by testing whether proposed modules, programmes and qualifications meet the requirements of their own academic frameworks and regulations referred to in *Chapter A2*.

In order to secure standards, approval processes are used to determine whether the assessment scheme 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, degree-awarding bodies use periodic review processes to re-affirm that the UK threshold academic standards, and their own academic standards, continue to be met.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Equality Act 2010

www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations 2011

www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2011/2260/contents/made

Equality Challenge Unit (2011) *Public Sector Equality Duty: Specific Duties for England*

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/public-sector-equality-duty-specific-duties-for-england/

Equality Challenge Unit (2011) *The Public Sector Equality Duty: Specific Duties for Wales*

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/the-public-sector-equality-duty-specific-duties-for-wales/

Equality Challenge Unit (2010) *Anti-Discrimination Law in Northern Ireland*

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/anti-discrimination-law-in-northern-ireland

QAA (2010) *Outcomes from Institutional Audit Second Series: Validation and Approval of New Provision, and its Periodic Review*

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Outcomes-institutional-audit-Validation-approval-new-provision-Second-series.pdf

Assessment of learning outcomes

Expectation A3.2

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the assessment of learning outcomes, which degree-awarding bodies are required to meet.

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree-awarding body have been satisfied.**

Assessment is used to judge student performance against the standards set. *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees* address the processes in detail but the ways in which these are used to secure academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to awards are summarised below.

For the purposes of the award of credit and/or qualifications, assessment is used to give students the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the relevant learning outcomes. In order to ensure that UK threshold academic standards set out in *Chapter A1* are met, decisions to award credit or qualifications are based on robust evidence that the module learning outcomes (for the award of credit) or programme learning outcomes (for the award of a qualification) have been achieved. In the case of research degree qualifications, learning outcomes or criteria for the award aligned to the relevant qualification descriptor are tested in assessment and demonstrated in order for an award to be made.

Degree-awarding bodies calibrate student achievement relative to the threshold standard in a consistent and systematic manner. As noted in *Chapter A2*, degree-awarding bodies establish their own regulations which define the standards which they set above and below the UK threshold.

Assessment decisions about the award of academic credit and/or qualifications are reached through processes approved by the senior academic authority and by decisions of formally constituted bodies to which responsibility for determining and approving awards has been delegated by that authority.

Reasonable adjustments to assessment modes are made where required to avoid the risk of disadvantage to students with protected characteristics, provided that these do not compromise academic standards as expressed through the learning outcomes.

Further guidelines, references and resources

Equality Act 2010

www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) Regulations 2011

www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2011/2260/contents/made

Equality Challenge Unit (2011) *Public Sector Equality Duty: Specific Duties for England*

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/public-sector-equality-duty-specific-duties-for-england/

Equality Challenge Unit (2011) *The Public Sector Equality Duty: Specific Duties for Wales*

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/the-public-sector-equality-duty-specific-duties-for-wales/

Equality Challenge Unit (2010) *Anti-Discrimination Law in Northern Ireland*

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/anti-discrimination-law-in-northern-ireland

QAA (2011) *Doctoral Degree Characteristics*

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=51>

QAA (2011) *Outcomes from Institutional Audit 2007-09*

www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/outcomes-from-institutional-audit-2007-9-assessment-and-feedback.pdf

Monitoring and review of alignment with UK threshold academic standards and degree-awarding bodies' own standards

Expectation A3.3

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

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented 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. *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees* address the processes in detail but the ways in which these are used to secure academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to the award of credit or qualifications are summarised as follows.

- Monitoring ensures that programmes are delivered in accordance with what was approved (using the definitive record of the programme as the reference point).

- Monitoring and review are used to ensure that academic currency is subsequently maintained and that programmes continue to meet the UK threshold standards set out in *Chapter A1* and continue to meet the degree-awarding bodies' own academic standards as defined by their academic frameworks and regulations referred to in *Chapter A2*.

In addition, degree-awarding bodies monitor and 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.

Externality

Expectation A3.4

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about external involvement in the setting and maintaining of academic standards, which degree-awarding bodies are required to meet.

In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that external and independent expertise is obtained at key stages of the processes for setting and maintaining academic standards. External expertise 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 consistently implemented.

External expertise is therefore sought both when new programmes are being approved and when existing programmes are being reviewed. See further *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval*, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* and *Chapter 11: Research Degrees*.

External examiners are appointed 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* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*.

Appendix 1 - The Expectations

Setting and maintaining academic standards

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 relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications
- awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

Expectation A2.1

In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

Expectation A2.2

Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) 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 and alumni.

Expectation A3.1

Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.

Expectation A3.2

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree-awarding body have been satisfied**

Expectation A3.3

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented 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 A3.4

In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

Appendix 2 - Membership of the advisory group for Part A

Name	Position	Affiliation
Keith Bartlett	Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality)	Norwich University 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 (Teaching and Learning)	University of Sussex
Helen Marshall	Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic and Business Development	University of South Wales
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 University London
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
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Corresponding
Members

Stella Heath	Assistant Director, QAA Scotland	QAA
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Eva Grob	Senior credential evaluator	Rectors' Conference of the Swiss universities (CRUS), Swiss ENIC-NARIC
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References

- ¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode
- ² www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education
- ³ www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=181
- ⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary
- ⁵ 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.
- ⁶ 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.
- ⁷ The Education (Recognised Bodies) (England) Order 2010 www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees#recognised-bodies; The Education (Recognised Bodies) (Scotland) Order 2007 www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2007/557/contents/made; The Education (Recognised Bodies) (Wales) Order 2012 www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2012/1260/contents/made; The Education (Recognised Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2005/522/contents/made.
- ⁸ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32388/11-781-applications-for-degree-awarding-powers-guidance.pdf
- ⁹ In accordance with the provisions of Section 91(5) of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*.
- ¹⁰ The UK national frameworks of higher education qualifications were first published in 2001. The FHEQ was revised in 2008.
- ¹¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education
- ¹² HNCs and HNDs which appear on the FHEQ are only those which are awarded by degree-awarding bodies under licence from Edexcel.
- ¹³ This requirement was set for countries participating in the Bologna Process in the 2003 Bergen ministerial communique.
- ¹⁴ 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, 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.
- ¹⁵ This includes taught or structured components of doctoral programmes.

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