

Talking about Quality

Supporting Student Discussions on Quality, Standards and Value for Money

Communication between students and higher education providers is important, especially discussions aimed at understanding the nature of the educational experience and the qualifications students achieve.

This resource aims to help students ensure these conversations are effective by clarifying some of the key terms.



Recent years have seen increased focus on expressions like value, value for money, standards and quality in higher education. Much has been written in the media, often linked to pledges by politicians to tackle ‘low value’ and ‘low quality’ courses. While higher education providers have illustrated the processes they have in place for assuring quality and standards, students have questioned the value of their higher education and what a quality experience should look like. This has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic when the ways courses are delivered and assessed has had to change.

At QAA we work with providers, students, governments and funding bodies – among other stakeholders – to safeguard academic standards and enhance the quality of UK higher education.

We have defined the terms ‘**academic quality**’ and ‘**academic standards**’ to ensure we all know what we are referring to when we use these words. The definitions we use are recognised across the sector, which means they should be used in similar ways within all providers when they are operating their processes for assuring quality and standards. The Expectations for quality and standards are set out in the [UK Quality Code](#), a key reference point for UK higher education which helps providers – and other stakeholders – to understand what is expected of them and what to expect from each other.



What are academic standards?

Set by the organisation awarding your qualification, academic standards must meet national requirements as identified in sector agreed reference points.



The Quality Code identifies the following Expectations for academic standards:

- The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework.
- The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.



The [Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#) set out the threshold (or minimum) academic standards for students to achieve at each level of a qualification. Annex D to the Frameworks sets out the common descriptions of the four main degree outcome classifications for bachelor's degrees with honours.

Examples of how providers assure this

When designing or making changes to courses, higher education providers identify the learning outcomes you are expected to achieve, and they ensure your learning outcomes are consistent with the national Frameworks for your level of study. Providers design the way in which you will be assessed to determine whether you have achieved these learning outcomes, and where you may have exceeded them.

The involvement of external experts is a key feature of UK higher education. Typically, these externals are senior academic staff working in another higher education provider or, if appropriate for the nature of your course, a related industry. They can contribute to a range of processes including course design, delivery and review. They can comment on the opportunities that students are given to achieve the standard of the award, and bring an external view of the way grades are calculated at each provider. In that last role, they are usually referred to as external examiners.

How students can be involved

Students can be engaged at all stages of course design, delivery and review. Students should be consulted on plans to design, make changes to and enhance courses, and you can also work in partnership to co-design them. Student feedback is crucial for review processes - annually and/or periodically. You may have the opportunity to become a student panellist to help review other courses at your institution. Each of these stages - design, delivery and review - will include consideration of both academic standards and the quality of the student experience.

What is academic quality?

We use 'academic quality' to describe the experience students have during their study.



While we describe 'academic standards' as being set and then secured or fixed over time, the elements of the student experience the provider puts in place to help students achieve those standards might vary over time, or perhaps between groups of students.

Academic quality relates primarily to the student journey through the life cycle of their course. It is used to talk about how, and how well, your university or college manages teaching, learning and assessment to help you progress through each level of your course and achieve your potential.

The Quality Code identifies the following Expectations for quality:

- Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.
- From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.



Examples of how providers assure this

When designing courses, higher education providers identify the kinds of academic support that will be needed by students to help them achieve the learning outcomes of the course.

Providers are responsible for ensuring this support is delivered and accessible to all students. They check this happens in practice through quality processes such as annual monitoring and periodic review of courses and professional support services. Providers also gather student feedback which is considered as part of these quality processes. Sometimes student views can only be addressed for future groups of students, but many providers are able to make adjustments during the academic year, allowing the students who provided the feedback to benefit directly. Responding to student feedback is not the same as implementing exactly what students have requested. There may be important reasons why providers need to respond differently, for example to ensure the standards of the course continue to be secured.



Providers are responsible for ensuring there is clear communication with students about the support that is available and for indicating how student views will be considered and addressed.

Providers have systematic processes for recruiting, supporting and developing appropriately qualified and skilled staff. Staff are provided with opportunities for professional development and sharing practice.

Student voice is a vital component of assuring quality, as student representative structures gather collective feedback, alongside opportunities to share individual student's thoughts and ideas through surveys and module or course evaluations. Student reps play an important part in quality processes, for example as members of committees where quality monitoring is discussed and decisions are made about the future delivery of the course.

What about the idea of value?

Notions of value and value for money differ from 'academic quality' and 'academic standards' in a number of important ways. The term 'value for money' doesn't currently have a definition that is agreed across the whole of the UK. There have been efforts to define it, for example by the [Office for Students](#), but even there it is recognised that value for money in higher education is a complex and contested concept.

Perceptions of value might relate to 'academic quality' but often include other factors over which providers have less control or direct influence than is the case with either quality or standards. For example, the perception of value might include broader and longer-term elements such as graduate earnings, job satisfaction or economic security. Students, rightly, have different aspirations for what they want to achieve from their time in higher education and how they hope it will affect their future life choices. These differences are welcome and encouraged. The factors which combine to form one person's understanding of value may be quite different from those of another.

This makes it difficult to talk about value without first clarifying the factors which those involved in the discussion consider to be important - and checking all those in the discussion are thinking of the same or similar factors.



How has the pandemic affected the quality or standard of my award?

The effects of the pandemic have brought about a number of changes to the way higher education courses are being delivered. Restrictions on physical movement have meant a large shift from in-person teaching and learning to digital or online delivery. Courses involving practical or work-based elements, including placements, have been very difficult or in some courses impossible to deliver as originally designed. The opportunities for students to socialise or carry out additional activities such as join clubs and societies have also been affected. Inevitably this is disappointing and even worrying for students.



Providers responded very quickly and, in many cases, with great imagination to offer courses in ways that were safe for students and staff. In doing this, close attention was paid to ensuring students were still able to meet the learning outcomes for their courses, even if the way they were supported to achieve those learning outcomes needed to change. Ensuring that agreed learning outcomes continue to be achieved by students is central to securing the academic standard of a course, even if the way the course is delivered and assessed needs to change.

We have seen examples where the learning outcomes themselves needed to be reconsidered or even changed - where that happens, consultation with the students on those courses is particularly important. Providers follow their systemic procedures for making and approving changes to courses and, in doing so, they refer to the Quality Code and the Qualifications Frameworks to ensure that the standard of the award still meets the expectations set out in those UK-wide sector reference points.

Questions to support thinking and talking about quality and standards

Changing the expected – or hoped for – student experience can result in students questioning how their qualifications will be regarded compared to awards achieved before, or after, the pandemic. The following questions are aimed at helping students to think and talk about the nature of their experience and the academic standard of their awards.

- In what ways has my course changed? And who has control over the changes? Have students been involved?

- Does the provider have flexibility to make changes or are there regulations or requirements the provider must meet? For example, is my course accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB)? If so, my provider may be following specialist requirements. Examples of PSRBs are the General Medical Council, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, and the Institution of Mechanical Engineers.

- What opportunities do I have – as an individual and as part of a wider group – to raise and discuss any views or concerns within my institution?

- Can I access additional support at this time? What adjustments or mitigations have been made to support student achievement during this time? Where can I find out about these mitigations? Am I clear how they affect me?

- Do I have specific support needs that should be taken into account? And do I know who I can contact to discuss these? Options may include your students' union as well as the provider.

- Is my provider making any additional information available about the nature of my course? For example, will my marks or grades be presented differently? Or is there other information about my course and how it has been delivered or assessed that it might be useful for me to share with potential employers?

Your provider and students' union, or equivalent student representation body, will be a good first source of information and advice.

QAA has produced a series of guidance, advice and support to help providers and students in the pandemic. We produce this with and for our members.



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