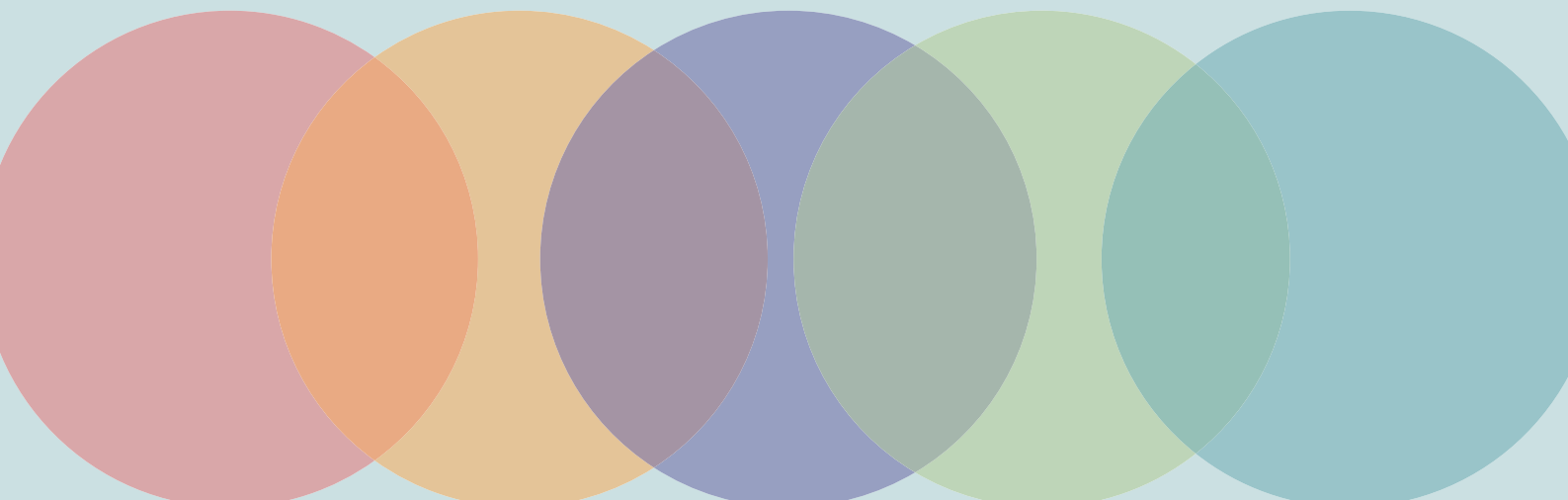


Guidelines for preparing programme specifications



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Guidelines for preparing programme specifications

Background

The Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the *Dearing report*) stressed 'the importance of clear and explicit information for students so that they can make informed choices about their studies and the levels they are aiming to achieve'. It recommended 'that clear descriptions of programmes should be developed so that students are able to compare different offerings and make sensible choices about the programmes they wish to take'.

Since the publication of the *Dearing report*, the context within which programme specifications are developed has changed considerably. Such changes include:

- the continuing development of other aspects of the Academic Infrastructure
- the impending introduction of fees
- the development of Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and the National Student Survey
- the development of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) audit process to one which places responsibility for maintenance of standards and assurance of quality within institutions themselves
- the introduction of Foundation Degrees and their associated employer focus
- the continuing devolution of higher education (HE) matters in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- the 2003 White Paper: *The future of higher education*
- the Bologna Process and other European developments
- the evolving nature of external subject review in HE institutions (although such review is undertaken for those further education (FE) colleges offering HE programmes), and the impact of the Higher Education Regulation Review Group and the associated importance of risk management in institutional procedures.

In seeking to rationalise the *Dearing report* purpose for programme specifications with the changes in context, and to highlight the continuing importance of that primary purpose, these *Guidelines* set out how programme specifications have developed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland over the last six years and how they are used.

Since the initial development of programme specifications, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has developed programme profiles; these provide prospective students with information that is mostly although not always of a summary nature. Programme specifications are different; they are typically used for a wider range of purposes, as well as providing information in greater detail.

Introduction

These *Guidelines* are intended to assist those preparing programme specifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Separate but related developments are taking place in Scotland. (QAA has also published additional guidance notes to support those writing programme specifications for Edexcel, HNC/D programmes and for those in FE colleges that may be unfamiliar with the purpose and process of writing such documents. See Annex 2.) They are not intended to be prescriptive, and reflect the fact that programme specifications are used effectively in many different ways.

What are programme specifications?

A programme specification is a concise description of the intended learning outcomes of an HE programme, and the means by which the outcomes are achieved and demonstrated. In general, modules or other units of study have stated outcomes, often set out in handbooks provided by institutions to inform student choice. These intended learning outcomes relate directly to the curriculum, study and assessment methods and criteria used to assess performance. Programme specifications can show how modules can be combined into whole qualifications. However, a programme specification is not simply an aggregation of module outcomes; it relates to the learning and attributes developed by the programme as a whole and which, in general, are typically in HE more than the sum of the parts.

For the purposes of audit and review, programme specifications are '...the definitive publicly available information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements of programmes of study, and audit teams will wish to explore their usefulness to students and staff, and the accuracy of the information contained in them' (*Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland, 2006*).

Programme specifications are currently presented in a number of ways. Open text narrative styles, for example, give greater flexibility, while templates used at an institutional level can offer a consistent 'house style'. Programme specifications provide essential information for QAA's review activities, but these activities do not require specifications to be provided in a particular format. When deciding on the format to be used, an institution or course team should consider how their preferred approach will best enable the specifications to be fit for the purpose(s) agreed by the institution.

Programme specifications have benefits that go beyond those of public information and accountability. Their preparation can provide a stimulus to teaching teams to reflect on, clarify and better integrate the aims and intended outcomes of their programmes with their design and delivery.

Programme specifications in context

Programme specifications are one of a number of ways in which HE providers are able to describe the intended learning outcomes. Subject benchmark statements represent general expectations about the standards of achievement and general attributes to be expected of a graduate in a given subject area. The qualifications frameworks provide information about the level and character of programmes leading to particular named awards. Programme specifications will reflect these general points of reference, but as they state the outcomes that should result from successful completion of an individual programme, they are a source of more specific information, particularly for prospective and current students.

Since the publication of the original guidelines in 2000, the following changes in context may be of particular importance when developing and writing programme specifications:

- an increased focus on institutional-level management of the security of academic standards and the quality of provision, informed by the consideration of external reference points including programme specifications themselves and how those specifications make use of other external reference points
- the implementation of TQI which has been designed as part of an initiative to make information about the quality of HE in UK universities and colleges more readily available and accessible to applicants to HE and their advisers
- European initiatives such as the development of an overarching Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA through the Bologna Process; and the provision of a (European) Diploma Supplement to individual students.

How are programme specifications currently used?

Some programme specifications focus on the student audience and aim to help them to understand the teaching and learning methods that enable their intended learning outcomes to be achieved; the assessment methods that enable achievement to be demonstrated; and the relationship of the programme and its study elements to the qualifications framework and to any subsequent professional qualification or career path.

In other cases, programme specifications are used primarily as quality assurance documents, particularly in design, approval and review processes. Bearing in mind the part that programme specifications play in audit and review processes (see above), it is important that they are fit for the purpose that they fulfill in each individual institution.

Programme specifications may be used in the following ways:

- as a source of information for **students and prospective students** seeking an understanding of a programme
- by **institutions and teaching teams**, to promote discussion and reflection on new and existing programmes and to ensure that there is a common understanding about the aims and intended learning outcomes for the programme. Programme specifications enable institutions to satisfy themselves that the designers of programmes are clear about their intended outcomes, and that these outcomes can be achieved and demonstrated. Programme specifications serve as a reference point for internal review and monitoring of the performance of a programme. They can also provide the necessary core programme documentation
- as a source of information for **internal and external reviewers and external examiners**, who need to understand the aims and intended learning outcomes of programmes
- as a source of information for **employers**, particularly about the skills and other transferable intellectual abilities developed by the programme
- by **professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)**, who accredit HE programmes that can lead to entry to a profession or other regulated occupation. Programme specifications should identify those aspects of the programme that are designed to meet the requirements of the relevant body
- as a basis for gaining **feedback from students or recent graduates** on the extent to which they perceived that the opportunities for learning were successful in promoting the intended outcomes.

In the interests of transparency and accuracy of information, all institutions will wish to make programme specifications available to students and to consider the benefits of writing them specifically with the student audience in mind.

For which programmes should specifications be written?

Given the primary purpose of programme specifications in provision of information, it is good practice for programme specifications to be produced for taught programmes at any level of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Programme specifications should be produced for single, major subject, and interdisciplinary programmes.

The term 'programme' is used in the sense of a defined curriculum route that leads to a named award. There are many types of programme, but the majority will fall into one of the following categories:

- a single or major subject programme
- a joint programme, combining two subjects, each with their own learning outcomes
- an interdisciplinary programme, drawing upon several subjects, but with an integrated set of learning outcomes
- a multidisciplinary programme, created by students choosing options or modules within the design rules of a scheme.

Some institutions have produced programme specifications for joint and collaborative programmes. In the case of joint programmes, it may be sufficient to rely upon the programme specifications for the constituent subjects, supported by a short statement of the rationale for the combination, and an indication of the ways in which the outcomes from each subject may reinforce each other. A simple test of whether a specification is required for a two-subject joint programme might be to ask whether the audiences for which programme specifications are intended are able to gain the information they need without one; or to ask if internal processes within which the programme specification is used are compromised if a programme specification is not produced.

Where there are well-defined pathways through a modular structure, that are followed by large numbers of students, it may be sensible to reflect these in programme specifications. Programme specifications can also be constructed to embrace a number of closely related pathways that lead to different named awards as these will be characterised by a similar set of intended learning outcomes.

Interdisciplinary programmes may be more difficult to characterise through programme specifications since it could be harder to state a complete set of outcomes as a whole where there are more opportunities for choice within the curriculum. However, the range of choice can be indicated and generic outcomes that are independent of particular bodies of knowledge can be stated. Personal transcripts may be used to provide a retrospective statement of the choices made by a student, the knowledge outcomes embodied in the content of the programme, and the individual's achievements. The process of developing a programme specification should ultimately result in a document that is comprehensible to the institution's intended audience(s), whether it is students, academics and/or employers.

What information should be included in a programme specification?

QAA does not prescribe any particular approach to or style of programme specification; institutions will wish to consider how they present their programme specifications and determine their content according to the purpose(s) for which they are written. It is, however, suggested that the following information will normally be included in a programme specification:

- awarding body/institution
- teaching institution (if different)
- details of accreditation by a professional/statutory body
- name of the final award
- programme title
- UCAS code
- criteria for admission to the programme
- aims of the programme
- relevant subject benchmark statements and other external and internal reference points used to inform programme outcomes
- programme outcomes: knowledge and understanding; skills and other attributes
- teaching, learning and assessment strategies to enable outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated
- programme structures and requirements, levels, modules, credits and awards
- mode of study
- language of study
- date at which the programme specification was written or revised.

In addition, institutions might wish to include information on:

- what makes the programme distinctive
- assessment regulations
- student support
- methods for evaluating and improving the quality and standards of learning, including consideration of stakeholder feedback from, for example, current students, graduates and employers.

The content will need to reflect the type of programme; for example, a programme containing work-based learning will include information about the location of the work-based learning and the learning activities that will be undertaken to enable the outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated.

Who should write programme specifications?

Producing a programme specification is an academic, rather than an administrative activity. It is an opportunity for a programme team to reflect on the aims and intended outcomes of their programmes. The questions posed in Annex 1 are an aid to that reflection. A programme specification can be a tangible output from the process of programme design.

Summary and conclusion

In summary, a programme specification may be used to explain the aims and intended learning outcomes of a programme, demonstrate which reference points have been used to inform the design of the programme and its aims and intended learning outcomes, and how the programme team engaged with the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*.

The development of a programme specification by the programme team may offer an opportunity for an institution to link quality enhancement to quality assurance through deliberative consideration of the curriculum. In such cases the programme specification may provide evidence of the deliberative process through which the programme aims and intended learning outcomes were determined, how the curriculum enables the intended learning outcomes to be achieved, and how assessments test the student's achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

An institution will normally use its programme specification to communicate information about the programmes it offers to students (prospective and current), as well as to staff, external examiners, employers and others.

Annex 1: Developing programme specifications

This Annex suggests a number of questions, and associated explanations, that are intended to be of use to staff who are involved in developing programme specifications. The list of questions is not definitive, nor comprehensive, but seeks to indicate areas that might normally be regarded as relevant in discussions linked to the development of programme specifications.

1 What do we want our students to achieve?

'What' may include subject knowledge and understanding, a range of intellectual, subject-based, and transferable skills, and their application in a range of contexts, and perhaps also competency to practise, values and other qualities. Programme outcome statements can be created by completing sentences like:

- This programme is distinctive because it develops...
- The most important values which inform this programme are...
- The academic content of this programme concentrates on...
- The most important intellectual skills developed in the programme are...
- The most useful practical skills, techniques and capabilities developed are...
- Competency will be developed in...
- The most important ways in which a student will learn are...
- On completing the programme we want students to know and understand...
- On completing the programme we want students to be able to...

2 What reference points can we use to show that what we want students to achieve has currency within the academic, professional or employer communities?

Possible reference points might include:

- institutional mission statements and any institutional policies on the development of general skills in fields such as communication, information technology, team working and career management
- subject benchmark statements
- current research or other advanced scholarship carried out by academic staff
- requirements of PSRBs
- occupational standards in fields where these are relevant
- qualification descriptors used in the national qualifications frameworks
- Edexcel Programme Guidance
- Foundation Degree frameworks
- relevant European or international reference points.

3 How should we use subject benchmark statements?

Subject benchmark statements provide a helpful starting point when designing a new programme or reviewing an existing programme. However, they are not the sole point of reference, particularly for programmes that do not coincide with the subject definitions used in preparing the subject benchmark statements.

Institutions should not simply transpose outcomes from subject benchmark statements into their programme specifications. Subject benchmark statements are not intended to be draft specifications. Rather, they should be used as a point of comparison, a stimulus to reflection, and a reference against which individual programme specifications may be justified.

4 How do we expect our students to achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes?

Consider the teaching, study and assessment methods used to promote learning. Some methods are more appropriate than others for developing particular types of learning outcome. For example:

- knowledge and understanding of a subject is often developed through lectures and seminars. Such direct teaching methods are usually supported by directed study of textbooks and journal articles (hard copy or electronic) and by assignment or project work. Knowledge and understanding is often assessed through unseen written examinations, but most if not all assessment methods will require some demonstration of knowledge and understanding
- intellectual skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and problem solving may be practiced and demonstrated through more active learning processes involving assignments or projects, group-learning activity such as a seminar or tutorial, laboratory, workshop, or field-based activity. Assessment of intellectual skills can utilise unseen written examinations or problem-based exercises. Independent project work or research dissertations are typically used to demonstrate capability in a range of intellectual skills linked to specialist knowledge, understanding and practical skills
- practical skills need to be developed through opportunities to practise the activity in an appropriate learning context (eg in laboratory, field, or workplace placement). Workbooks or guidance manuals may also be used to support learning. Assessment of competence in exercising a practical skill must involve practical demonstration of it
- transferable/key skills, that are readily transferable to employment and other contexts, such as communication, teamwork etc can be developed through naturally arising opportunities within the curriculum. For example, written communication skills can be developed and assessed through essays or dissertations; oral communication skills through presentations in seminars; or team working skills through collaborative projects. Skills may be developed also through extra-curricular activities including work experience, student representative work, and social and cultural activities.

5 Where can further information be found?

Programme specifications often represent a concise summary of the main features of a programme, and of the learning outcomes that a typical student might reasonably be expected to achieve if full advantage is taken of the learning opportunities provided. The specification should contain a statement of where more detailed information can be found. Institutions that offer 'layered' programme specifications on their intranet or website provide links to module guides or course handbooks, where the reader can access an increasing level of detail if required.

Annex 2: Working with programme specifications: a leaflet for further education colleges

Programme specifications were one of the recommendations of the *Dearing report*. Lord Dearing recommended that clear descriptions of programmes should be developed so that students could compare offerings and make sensible choices.

This document has been written to help subject teams involved in HE in FE colleges who may be unfamiliar with the purpose, content and benefits of programme specifications. There is a more detailed guidance document available on QAA's website.

What are programme specifications?

A programme specification is a concise description of the intended learning outcomes from an HE programme, and the means by which these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated.

Programme specifications should make explicit:

- the intended learning outcomes of the programme
- the teaching and learning methods that enable learners to achieve these outcomes and the assessment methods used to demonstrate their achievement
- the relationship of the programme and its study elements to the FHEQ and, where appropriate, subject benchmark statements.

A good programme specification will improve student understanding of how and when learning occurs, and of what is being learned, and thereby inform reflection upon personal learning, performance and achievement, and subsequent planning for educational and career development.

Who is the intended audience?

The original intention of a programme specification is that they should be documents that are comprehensible to the lay reader, such as a prospective student or employer. In many cases although they have been written to be used as validation documents the language and the content can be quite complex. It is important to decide on the purpose(s) and the audience(s) of the document, which will then determine the language and level of detail.

The end result of the process should be a document that meets the *Dearing report's* expectation of a 'clear description that will facilitate informed student choice'.

How much detail should there be?

It should be a concise but informative document. The level of detail will be dependent on the purpose of the document and the intended audience.

What are the elements that should go into a programme specification?

It is for the institution to decide the generic elements that it wants to include in all specifications.

The following information will normally be included:

- awarding body/institution
- teaching institution (if different)

- details of accreditation by a professional body
- name of the final award
- programme title
- UCAS code
- aims of the programme
- relevant subject benchmark statements and other external and internal reference points used to inform programme outcomes
- programme outcomes: knowledge and understanding; skills and other attributes
- teaching, learning and assessment strategies to enable outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated
- programme structures and requirements, levels, modules, credits and awards
- language of study
- date at which the programme specification was written or revised.

Can other elements be included?

A range of additional elements can be included, such as:

- criteria for admission to the programme
- information about assessment regulations
- indicators of quality
- particular support for learning
- methods for evaluating and improving the quality and standards of learning
- work-based learning elements
- distinctive features of the programme
- the role of the awarding/validating body.

Who should write the programme specification?

Producing a programme specification is an academic, rather than an administrative activity. It is an opportunity for a course team to reflect on the aims and intended outcomes of their programmes.

How is a programme specification written?

There are two general approaches. One is that the units of study are identified and the aims and outcomes are written from them. Another approach is where the aims and outcomes of the overall programme are identified first and then the units that allow achievement of these aims and outcomes are selected/written.

Colleges may benefit from discussing approaches to writing programme specifications with their validating/awarding body. It may be that colleges have to use the same template as is used in the HE institution validating the programme.

Programme specifications can show how modules can be combined into whole qualifications. However, the programme specification is not simply an aggregation of

module outcomes. It relates to the learning and attributes developed by the programme as a whole which, in general, should be more than the sum of the parts.

It is recommended that the institution decides the range and detail of elements that will be applied in the description of all of its HE provision (eg the use of particular level descriptors, grading schemes, types of student support etc). This will help to ensure consistency across all HE programmes.

Why can't I just use the Edexcel specification?

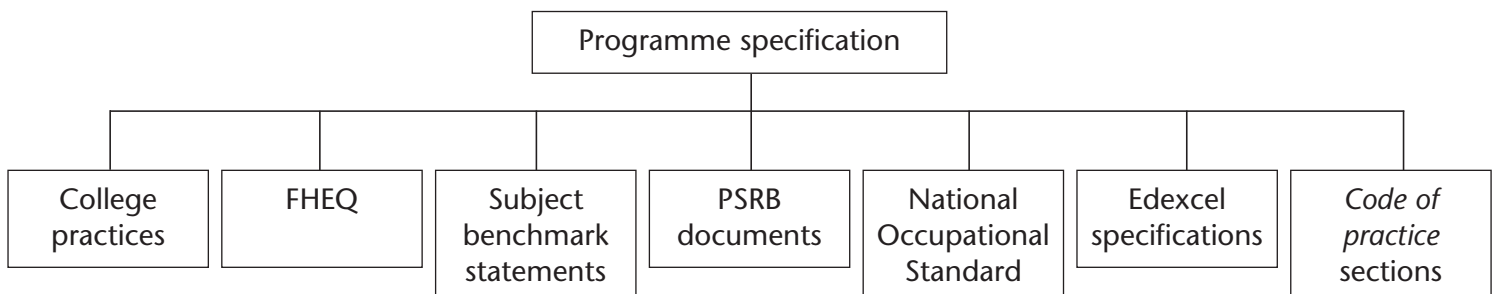
There is no such thing as an Edexcel programme specification. Edexcel lays down certain requirements about some aspects of content and structure of a programme. They provide a portfolio of option units for the subject teams to select from, but it is up to the subject team to put together a programme that allows the necessary learning outcomes to be achieved for the aims that they have identified.

How should programme specifications be presented?

Programme specifications may be presented in a number of ways. Open text narrative styles give greater flexibility, while templates offer a college a consistent 'house style'. There is no one particular format that is required by QAA.

Are there any useful reference tools to contribute to curriculum input?

Determining the intended learning outcomes of a programme is an important institutional responsibility, and there are a number of sources of information that subject teams should refer to when developing outcome statements, such as:



What are the benefits of producing a programme specification?

Programme specifications provide clear and accessible information for students about the content of a programme of study. Preparing programme specifications provides a stimulus to teaching teams to think critically about their programme. This requires careful and systematic analysis of the curriculum, and its teaching, learning and assessment methods. Used in this way, programme specifications also help the teaching team have ownership of the programme. A programme specification can be a tangible output from the process of programme design.

How can programme specifications be used?

As a source of information for:

- students and prospective students seeking an understanding of a programme
- employers, particularly about the skills and other transferable intellectual abilities developed by the programme
- PSRBs who accredit HE programmes that can lead to entry to a profession or other regulated occupation
- institutions and teaching teams, to promote discussion and reflection on new and existing programmes
- academic reviewers and external examiners who need to understand the aims and intended outcomes of programmes
- validation processes
- programme self-evaluation processes.

Which programmes should they be written for?

A programme specification should be written for each HE programme.

What are programme 'aims' and how are they expressed?

The selection of the aims is informed by a number of things. These aims should reflect the institution's purpose in offering this programme of study, as well as the needs of the local/regional environment in contributing to employer and skills gaps.

What are 'learning outcomes' and how are they written?

Learning outcomes are statements that identify what learners will have gained as a result of their learning; they should be linked directly to the knowledge, understanding, skills, capabilities and values that a student will have gained after completing a programme, and they should be set at an appropriate level by reference to the FHEQ.

Learning outcomes should be written for the programme at a particular level. One way of doing this is to consider what it is that the successful student is expected to know and understand, together with the skills that they should be able to demonstrate on successful completion of the programme. Learning outcomes are an expression of such considerations, also identifying how they can be achieved and within the context of the aims of the college.

How is the level of an award established?

The subject team sets the level of the award by setting the learning outcomes at the appropriate level for the programme/qualification and selecting/writing units that enable these outcomes to be achieved at the right level.

A useful reference tool is the FHEQ. It promotes a clear understanding of the achievements and attributes represented by a particular qualification at each of the five levels, which span from certificate to doctorate. The qualification descriptors set out the attributes and abilities that can be expected of the holder of the qualification used as an example at each of these levels.

How can subject benchmark statements be used?

Subject benchmark statements provide a helpful starting point when designing a new programme or reviewing an existing one. Although they are written for honours degree level they can inform curriculum content for Higher Nationals and Foundation Degrees as well as providing information on what will be needed if a student is to progress to honours-level study. They set out the expectations about standards in a range of subject areas.

Components of subject benchmark statements should not simply be transposed into programme specifications.

The Foundation Degree qualification benchmark describes the distinctive features of this award. It can make a significant contribution to the design and identification of appropriate content of programmes leading to the award.

Some programmes have different pathways; how are these dealt with?

In cases where a named award has a number of pathways, it is useful to identify any learning outcomes that are specific to each pathway, together with the relevant teaching learning and assessment strategies.

What other activities can support the writing of the programme specification?

The process of writing a programme specification can also include or result in a number of other activities such as:

- mapping of the assessment strategy for each unit
- mapping of the teaching and learning strategy for each unit
- reference to the requirements of other bodies (eg PSRB)
- inclusion of other relevant reference material (eg National Occupational Standards)
- identification of H1 and H2 units in Edexcel programmes, and their number, balance and contributions to the curriculum.

Annex 3: Acknowledgements

The revision of these *Guidelines* has drawn heavily upon discussions held at a number of meetings including those held in March, April and November 2005, and in particular on the wide range of examples provided by institutions in support of those discussions (as indicated in the interim report on programme specifications (www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programspec/interimreport/)).

QAA would also like to thank everyone who attended the inaugural liaison conference in April 2005 on programme specifications and all those who responded to the consultation in spring 2006.

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