

Please note: the proposal for Programme Plus was removed from the final *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications following consultation with the higher education sector*

December 2005

Proposals for guidance on the minimum content of published versions of programme specifications

Contents

Background

Context

Proposal: 'Programme Plus'

Consultation

Background

- 1 Following the publication of the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the *Dearing report*) in 1997, and in consultation with the higher education sector, QAA published *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications* (the *Guidelines*) in 2000. The *Guidelines* outlined a new approach to the description of programmes of study, targeted at students.
- 2 The *Guidelines* included models of programme specifications that followed the *Dearing* proposals, but also focused on the description of programmes of study in a technical and specialist manner. Use of the 'language' of the higher education sector has often led to the production of complex documents. While the documents serve various useful purposes – particularly in terms of the approval, annual and periodic evaluation of programmes – they do not always meet the wider *Dearing* aims concerning readily accessible and comparable information for students.
- 3 Many institutions have sought to make programme specifications more accessible to interested parties – for example they have provided different versions or summaries for students or employers – but there has been little consistency in this respect.
- 4 At the same time, institutional audit has tested the roles of programme specifications with regard to institutional quality management processes and has largely found them to be effective (identifying areas for development where necessary). Therefore, higher education institutions have documents that serve useful purposes but which have deviated, to some extent, from the original *Dearing* proposals.

Context

- 5 QAA has led discussions and a consultation that have considered the various approaches to programme specifications and their use, with a view to further developing or refining them to meet more consistently the needs of particular audiences, such as students and employers. Greater consistency in presentation would help understanding and comparisons – the main *Dearing* aims for programme specifications. This approach should provide benefit for student

admissions, particularly if linked to the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) requirements of *HEFCE 03/51*.

- 6 In order to discover how this might be achieved without unnecessary additional effort, we have focused attention on the nature of the core information that should be available to prospective and current students; its presentation in 'student friendly' terms; and identification of ways in which current documentation can be 'filtered' (or 'packaged') to address the needs of this target audience. In addition, we have considered what additional information might significantly enhance the ability of prospective students to make reasoned decisions regarding their choice of programme and how this might be presented.
- 7 A consistent feature in all discussions and consultation responses has been an emphasis on the need to recognise the benefits of the current uses of programme specifications. These fulfil a range of roles and are provided by individual institutions in a variety of formats related to their own particular needs. We believe it is important that any further development or refinement of programme specifications should not detract from these current applications and benefits. We do, however, also believe that there might well be great benefits in developing a simple approach to making a minimum set of programme data available to a public audience in a form that would assist comparisons, providing it can draw upon existing documentation. But to call such data sets 'programme specifications' would undoubtedly cause additional confusion.

Proposal: 'Programme Plus'

- 8 The proposals set out in the Annex suggest how data that is particularly relevant for current and prospective students, and draws on existing institutional documentation, might provide information in a readily comparable form. The aim of this process would be to enable institutions to produce a common set of core information, based on existing documentation, with signposting to allow students to access the parts that are relevant to their specific interests. The purpose is not to rewrite programme specifications, but to facilitate the presentation of an agreed set of information from within them. We propose that this information is called 'Programme Plus' and includes a 'minimum content index' that will direct students to the specific areas within existing programme specifications that they may wish to consult. It is anticipated that this will be most readily achieved using links on institutions' own websites.
- 9 Programme Plus would include the agreed core information and could also indicate any areas of additional information that institutions might wish to provide.
- 10 We propose that the TQI site should hold the 'minimum content index' for Programme Plus, with hyperlinks to institutions' websites. This approach would help prospective students to navigate the existing information on HEI websites, and would make comparisons easier. It would also allow institutions to combine subject areas currently split by the requirements of TQI. Furthermore, the information, being web-based, would be attractive to students.
- 11 The title 'Programme Plus' and its structure would be the same for all institutions, and language would be 'student-friendly'. It could also provide additional information (normally in the form of web links) to contextualise the programme of study for the prospective student. Institutions might also decide to make the material available in other forms for some students and in order to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). We envisage that

Programme Plus information would develop naturally alongside other institutional activity, such as programme design, approval, annual and periodic evaluation, and initiatives to meet the requirements of TQI.

- 12 The development of Programme Plus seeks to address a fitness **for** purpose rather than fitness **of** purpose, in terms of addressing the original *Dearing* notion of providing comparable information for prospective students. It would build on the substantial work already undertaken by the sector on programme specifications and provide clear signposts, for students and others, to information that institutions already have available.
- 13 The proposals for the development of Programme Plus, with its links through to institution's programme specifications, align with the original *Dearing* concept of supporting current and prospective students by providing them with the opportunity to make informed choices about programmes/institutions, based on clear and readily comparable information.

Consultation

- 14 QAA expects to publish an updated edition of the *Guidelines* by May 2006, following the consultation with the sector on the proposals for Programme Plus.
- 15 The consultation seeks views on the following elements:
 - the general approach
 - the proposed title (Programme Plus)
 - the (minimum) content of Programme Plus and its headings/questions
 - the provision of optional additional information
 - the relationship between Programme Plus, TQI and institutions' own information provision to students and others
 - a timetable for implementation.

Please respond to Fiona Crozier on these and any other relevant points by 28 February 2006.