UK Quality Code
for Higher Education

Advice and Guidance

Course Design and Development

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Contents

Regulatory contexts for the Quality Code

The Quality Code articulates a set of principles that apply across the UK through four Expectations. These Expectations are then explained and contextualised through Core and Common practices in a way that allows institutions to demonstrate them. The Expectations, Core and Common practices are not regulatory requirements in England, but the Practices should be demonstrated by providers operating in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

National regulators and QAA are not bound by the information in this advice and guidance and will not view it as containing indicators of compliance. This guidance does not interpret statutory requirements.

Terminology

Course: An approved pathway of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads towards a qualification. UK higher education courses must be approved by UK degree–awarding bodies. They might also be referred to as programmes, units or modules.

Approval: The formal endorsement of a pathway of study by a UK degree–awarding body. This may also be a referred to as 'validation'.

Key stakeholders: Those who are vital to the course design and development process, such as students, academics and professional staff.

External stakeholders: Those involved in the course design and development process who are external to the provider such as employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

Credit: A means of calculating and recognising learning, used by most higher education providers, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level of study and used for the purpose of certification.

Credit bearing: Refers to a course and/or award made by a provider that comprises a stipulated number of credits.

Expectations and Practices

The advice underneath the Expectations and Practices is not mandatory for providers but illustrative of a range of possible approaches.

This Theme aims to support UK higher education providers in meeting their responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of the courses they offer and the credit and qualifications they award, within the context of their own mission, values and strategic objectives. Responsibility for setting and maintaining standards and quality lies with the degree-awarding body. This Theme is relevant to any delivery organisation(s) with which a provider may work.

In addition to the responsibility for the quality of learning opportunities of the courses they offer, providers can use course design and development to facilitate a culture of innovation, creativity and continuous improvement through the creation of unique and market-attractive portfolios. It can be informed by feedback from a range of stakeholders/sources and developments. It can reflect multidisciplinary research, contemporary industry practice, pedagogical and technological advancements, and current affairs.

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

The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications provide definitive points of reference for UK higher education providers when designing courses. They also provide a context in which qualifications can be reviewed and developed.

Qualifications are determined by level and academic credit. Level descriptors and academic credit values allow providers to accurately describe and market their qualifications in a consistent manner. Not only are they tools for securing threshold academic standards nationally, they allow valid comparisons to be made with qualifications in other nations which enables student mobility.

Core practices

- **The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks.**
  In practice, this means that when designing and approving courses, relevant national qualifications frameworks are referred to.

- **Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.**
  In practice, this means that the awarding body or organisation ensures that it maintains responsibility for setting and maintaining standards of a course regardless of where it is delivered.

- **The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.**
  In practice, this means that feedback from external stakeholders is used to inform course design and development.

Common practice

- **The provider reviews its core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**
  In practice, this means that regular monitoring and evaluation are used to drive improvement and enhancement of course design and development processes.

Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.

Feedback from key stakeholders/sources and multidisciplinary research allow developers to craft relevant and innovative courses of study. Sources of feedback for course design may include internal and external specialists, prospective, current and past students, employers and PSRBs. The incorporation of a systematic, relevant and stimulating assessment strategy, which enables course and module learning outcomes to be met, is also a key consideration for course design and development.

Core practices

- **The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.**
  In practice, this means that course approval processes facilitate the design and development of high-quality, relevant, market-attractive courses which lead to credible and recognised positive outcomes for students.

- **The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.**
  In practice, this means that course approval processes ensure that there are appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

- **The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.**
  In practice, this means that course approval processes ensure that there are appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

- **Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.**
  In practice, this means that when a course is designed and developed in partnership with an external organisation, the degree-awarding body's course approval processes consider and document responsibilities in relation to delivery, support and monitoring arrangements.

Common practices

- **The provider reviews its core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**
  In practice, this means that regular monitoring and evaluation are used to drive improvement and enhancement of course design and development processes.

- **The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.**
  In practice, this means that students are key stakeholders in course design and development processes.

Guiding principles

The guiding principles given here are not mandatory for any provider. They are a concise expression of the fundamental practices of the higher education sector, based on the experience of a wide range of providers. They are intended as a framework for providers to consider when establishing new or looking at existing higher education provision. They are not exhaustive and there will be other ways for providers to meet their requirements.

1   **Strategic oversight ensures that course design, development and approval processes and outcomes remain consistent and transparent.**

As well as assuring the standards and quality of their courses, providers ensure that their academic portfolio is reflective of their mission and strategic objectives. Strategic oversight enables providers to set clear direction and promote a shared understanding of the processes for, and outcomes of, course design, development and approval. It enables providers to oversee the integration of the academic and business aspects of course approval in an objective manner.

2   **Accessible and flexible processes for course design, development and approval facilitate continuous improvement of provision and are proportionate to risk.**

Course design and development processes should be straightforward and tailored to the perceived level of risk. This encourages constructive engagement from staff, students and other stakeholders, and supports the continuous improvement of courses. Engagement can be effectively supported by providing accessible information, which details key steps, timescales, roles and responsibilities, and links to external/internal reference materials.

3   **Internal guidance and external reference points are used in course design, development and approval.**

The credibility of courses is anchored in recognised national and European frameworks, applicable PSRB requirements and degree-level Apprenticeship Standards. These reference points help to maintain sector-recognised standards by offering consistency across the range of provision. Providers also develop and use internal guidance against which courses are designed, developed and approved.

4   **Feedback from internal and external stakeholders is used to inform course content.**

Continuous engagement with internal and external stakeholders such as students, academic colleagues from other providers, employers and professional bodies informs the design and development of courses, ensuring the continuing relevance of curricula, assessment methods and teaching approaches.

Within their own context, a provider might consider how stakeholder input is gathered and integrated as part of the core process. The nature and extent of external input should be proportionate to the stage of the process, the decision being taken and the level of risk associated with the development.

5   **Development of staff, students and other participants enables effective engagement with the course design, development and approval processes.**

Providers determine the criteria which underpin effective course design within their organisational context, including how the criteria are reflected in the course. To achieve desired outcomes and to use collective expertise, providers should support those involved. Internal and external stakeholders require clear information and guidance, and those new to these processes will need appropriate support to facilitate their contribution.

6   **Course design, development and approval processes result in definitive course documents.**

Approval processes should ensure that definitive course documentation is produced accurately and fairly describing the learning opportunities, intended student outcomes and support offered.

Providers are responsible and accountable for the information they produce and for ensuring definitive course documentation remains current, transparent, focused on the intended audiences and complies with any external or legal requirements.

7   **Design, development and approval processes are reviewed and enhanced.**

Providers ensure that course design, development and approval processes remain effective and continue to contribute to the enhancement of the provision offered (see also Monitoring and Evaluation Theme). In evaluating processes, providers may draw upon a wide range of evidence including feedback from academic staff, professional services, students and external stakeholders. There are also opportunities to identify and benchmark against sector best practice.

Practical advice

This section provides practical, contextualised advice to providers on course design and development. The information is set against the guiding principles the advice will help you achieve. Please bear in mind that this guidance is illustrative and intended to inform the approaches you consider and ultimately implement.

Providers have their own processes for proposing a new course, which typically include consideration of the business case and an evaluation of its academic merits. If working in partnership to deliver a course, all parties will require knowledge of the awarding body's processes alongside their own.

The outline proposal for a new course will often be approved by the part of the provider's committee framework which has strategic oversight and responsibility to ensure the necessary staffing and budgeting exist to support the delivery of the proposed course. The body that considers the outline plan could have representation from academic staff, professional services, senior management and students. If the provider does not have its own awarding powers, there will be close liaison with the awarding body throughout the course design and development process.

Strategic oversight ensures that course design, development and approval processes and outcomes remain consistent and transparent
(Guiding principle 1)

Providers should design and develop processes for course design and development which are fit for purpose and appropriate to the size and nature of the provider. Ownership and oversight of these processes should be the responsibility of a senior academic committee (such as the Senate/Academic Board). These processes should be repeatable and adaptable, according to the proposal under consideration.

The outcomes of course design, development and approval processes should be documented and considered by academic (and/or other) decision-making bodies and made available to the internal and external stakeholders who have been involved in those processes.

Considerations for strategic oversight include:

- the use of national and UK-wide reference points
- development and training of staff
- formulation of design and development processes
- definitive documentation
- capturing and using feedback
- process monitoring and evaluation.

Accessible and flexible processes for course design, development and approval facilitate continuous improvement of provision and are proportionate to risk (Guiding principle 2)

Course design and development should be focused on creating positive learning outcomes for students and align to provider strategies for academic provision. While course design and development should be robust, processes should be flexible and responsive to the scale of the proposal (for example, a new area of curriculum within an existing course, an additional module or learning opportunity, or an entirely new offer) and not place an undue burden on the provider.

Good practice might include:

- clarity and availability of information about processes, such as handbooks or policy documents, being available to all stakeholders involved

- opportunities for separate and holistic consideration of the academic and business cases for a proposal

- informative and accurate reporting of design and development processes and outcomes

- opportunities for course development to be proactive (for example, in relation to emerging disciplines or interdisciplinary opportunities) and reactive (for example, in relation to institutional, local or national strategies, or developments within the discipline).

Risk is a key consideration for course design and development. Risk-based approaches can determine the timelines and nature of course approval. However, risk can also be considered in the context of a proposal's feasibility (for instance, based on operational, resource or recruitment considerations) or the impact on a provider's existing provision. Risk should be considered in relation to potential partners involved in the proposal, for example, with respect to delivery or accreditation, appropriate due diligence should be undertaken to ensure the suitability of these relationships.

Accessible and flexible processes for course design and development:

- provide an overview of the intended academic content, delivery and assessment method(s) and teaching mode(s) of proposals

- indicate the operational, human and learning resource requirements for a course

- are reflective and recognise the limitations of any proposal

- incorporate business case and academic approval for development at an appropriate stage of development

- offer the opportunity for a course proposal to be approved or rejected, including providing recommendations to the provider to whether the course can be approved in its presented form, approved with conditions for amendment, or cannot be approved in its presented form

- comment on the proposal with reference to the appropriateness of the aims and intended learning outcomes, admissions criteria, structure, content and assessment, and provisions for student support on the course

- provide a summary of commendable aspects of the proposed course.

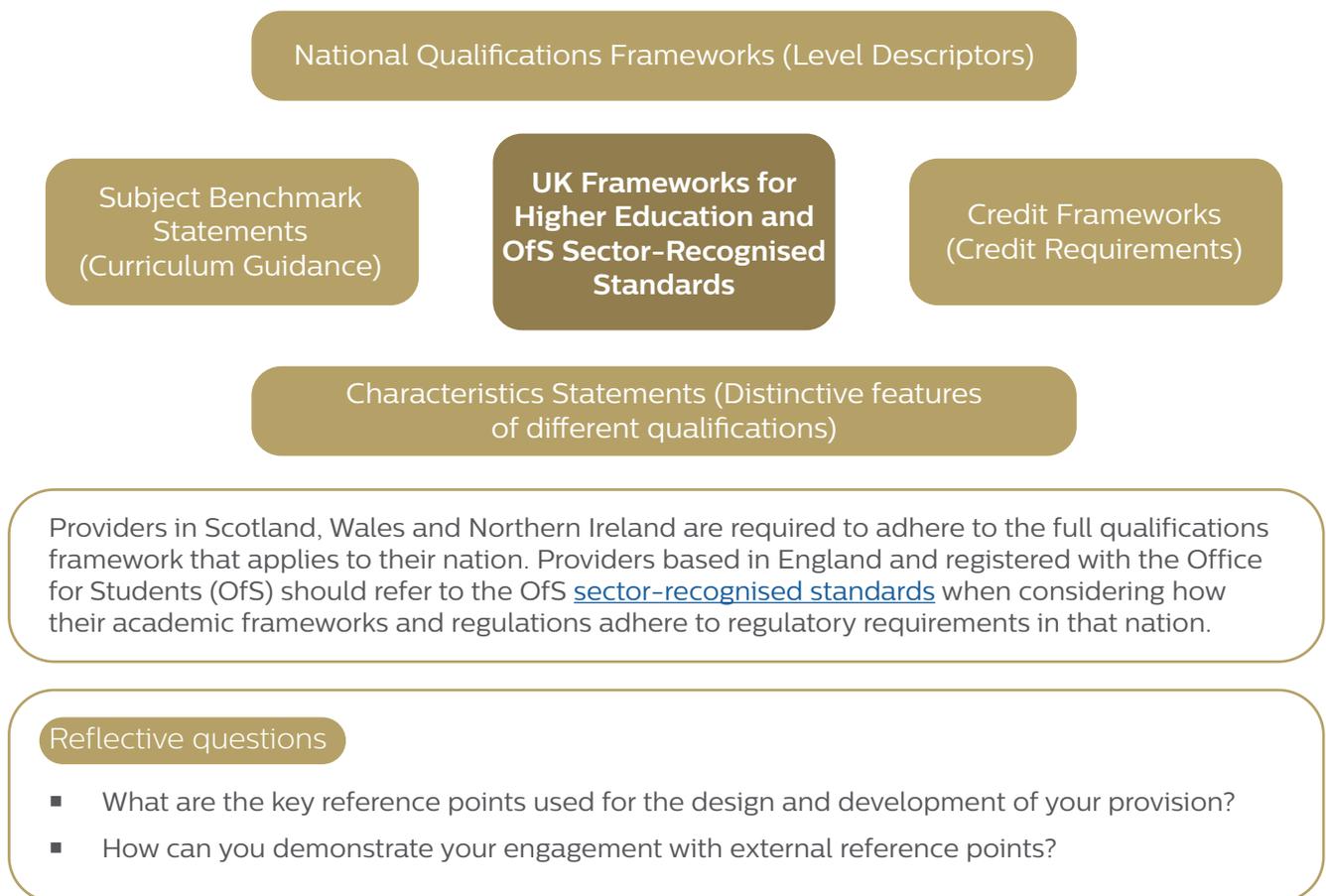## Internal guidance and external reference points are used in course design, development and approval (Guiding principle 3)

Providers should define which internal documents are used to inform course design. In defining aims and intended learning outcomes, course developers draw on their own subject and pedagogic expertise (see also Learning and Teaching Theme), on experience of similar and precursor courses, and on lessons drawn from monitoring, audit and review. Where course development teams are not situated in awarding bodies, they will be advised by awarding bodies of any norms, for example, regarding the number and format of learning outcomes at each level.

In addition to the use of external reference points, course designers may wish to request external input during the design process. This may be via direct communications with students, PSRBs, subject networks, graduates, employers, external specialists or other stakeholders.

Figure 1: The external academic infrastructure that supports course design.

National Qualifications Frameworks (Level Descriptors)

Subject Benchmark Statements (Curriculum Guidance)

UK Frameworks for Higher Education and OfS Sector-Recognised Standards

Credit Frameworks (Credit Requirements)

Characteristics Statements (Distinctive features of different qualifications)

Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are required to adhere to the full qualifications framework that applies to their nation. Providers based in England and registered with the Office for Students (OfS) should refer to the OfS sector-recognised standards when considering how their academic frameworks and regulations adhere to regulatory requirements in that nation.

Reflective questions

- What are the key reference points used for the design and development of your provision?
- How can you demonstrate your engagement with external reference points?

Feedback from internal and external stakeholders is used to inform course content (Guiding principle 4)

During the process of designing and approving new courses, as well as during the ongoing development of existing provision, there are a range of key stakeholders who can provide valuable insights to help strengthen these processes. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Providers should allow course development or delivery teams the opportunity to engage with academic staff not involved within the design or development of a proposal. This could be facilitated solely using internal staff on approval panels, or through other opportunities for wider consideration such as allocating 'critical friends'.

- Providers should engage students in design, development and approval processes to ensure the student voice is actively represented (see also Student Engagement Theme). This helps to assure that courses are well designed and provide a high-quality academic experience for all students. Providers should consult with current students and alumni (where possible) during the course design and development process. Student engagement opportunities should be provided on initial design and approval of a course and during the ongoing development.

Mechanisms for student engagement might include collective engagement through:

- cohort consultation meetings

- systematic use of student feedback data in the design and development of courses (for example, internal and external survey data; student achievement data)

- consultation with alumni

- individual engagement through systematic inclusion of students as members of design teams when new courses are considered, and existing courses are developed

- student members of approval and review panels.

- Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and other networks: Providers can engage with contacts in industry and PSRBs in design, development and approval processes to ensure proposals are well designed and provide an experience for students that prepares them for employment or self-employment. Opportunities for engagement can be provided on the initial design and approval of a course, and in its ongoing development. Common practice in the sector includes: establishing Industry Advisory Panels. These can be formally or informally organised, to discuss course developments at key stages during the design and approval process; liaising with professional body contacts and education teams to consider alignment to professional standards or requirements.

Figure 2: Stakeholders for course design and development.
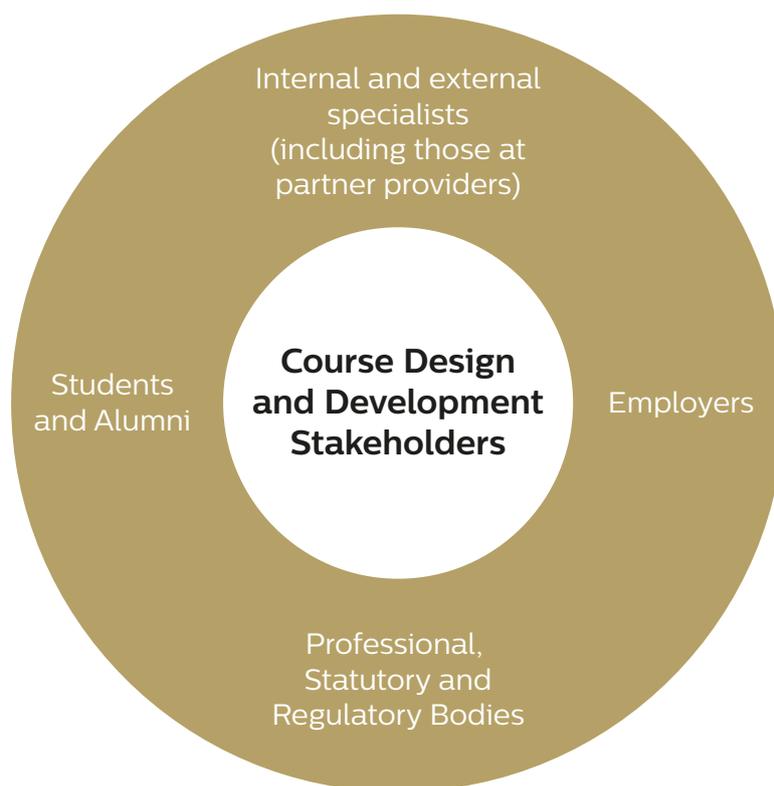
Reflective questions

- Who are key stakeholders for your course design, development and approval processes?

- What are the ways in which stakeholders can be engaged at your institution?

- What contribution do students make to the design and development of courses?

- What is the most appropriate balance between different stakeholder groups and how can this balance be achieved?

Development of staff, students and other participants enables effective engagement with course design, development and approval process (Guiding principle 5)

Not all stakeholders involved will have experience of developing higher education provision, and those that do (internally and externally) will have varying degrees of experience. It would be beneficial to providers and stakeholders to ensure that the language used is commonly understood and that expectations of their role in the design and development process are clear. In support of this, providers might publish written guidance and offer training and development opportunities. For example, this might involve working with the students' representative body or other student representational groups to develop opportunities for informed student engagement with course design and development processes.

Reflective questions

- How do you engage with different stakeholder groups in respect of course design, development and approval at your institution?
- What are the ongoing development needs of the participants within your course design, development and approval processes?

Course design, development and approval processes result in definitive course documents (Guiding principle 6)

The awarding body designs and approves its own course specifications. A common approach and format is typical across a provider. These documents constitute the approved definition of a course and module, which should contain sufficient information for stakeholders about intended aims and learning outcomes and about the approach to teaching, learning and assessment. Related documentation, such as prospectuses, institutional websites and other marketing information should be derived and updated with respect to this definitive documentation and adhere to the legal requirements around provision of information.

Awarding body procedures may state that definitive course documentation cannot be changed following final approval, and prior to the course commencing. Changes after approval should require modification through the formal process. An awarding body 'owns' the definitive documentation, making it accessible for stakeholders and ensuring version control.

Reflective questions

- What approaches do you need to take to ensure a complete record of definitive course documentation is maintained?
- Which stakeholders need to have sight of your definitive course documentation and how can this be made available to them?
- How are adaptations to definitive documents made to reflect changes to a course?

Course design, development and approval processes are monitored, reviewed and enhanced (Guiding principle 7)

Providers review their course design and development processes to ensure that they retain currency. Providers set their timeframe for the review of policy, process and guidance which could be annually or over a longer period. Internal processes should be clear about where responsibility lies for reviewing policy and process. Evaluation of policies and processes may involve the following:

- **Internal feedback mechanisms** from those involved in designing and delivering courses, that is academic staff and students as well as those involved in the approval process such as the members of an approval panel.

- **Feedback from external stakeholders** if they have been involved in the process (see also External Expertise Theme). Ongoing engagement with PSRBs can also prove useful particularly in relation to the extent to which course design and development processes meet their requirements.

- **Data tracking** might involve monitoring the progress of course approvals and developments. This can provide insight into areas of good practice to support improvement of processes and guidance. This tracking may consider achievement against key milestones in the academic calendar, such as those associated with course advertisement and marketing.

- **Monitoring changes made to courses through modification processes** and analysing any trends such as evolution in assessment strategy or learning outcomes. Understanding trends may inform institutional guidance and support.

- **Monitoring of student achievement on courses** might also be a useful method of reviewing the success of a course approval process, as well as the robustness of course development processes.

- **Student survey data**, particularly questions on curriculum and assessment design and associated free text answers, can also be used to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the initial course design or changes that have been made as a result of monitoring activity.

Reflective questions

- What opportunities do you have to collect feedback from stakeholders involved in course design, development and approval?

- What sources of data are available that could inform course design and development?

- How does monitoring and feedback on course design, development and approval processes inform the strategic development of your approach to portfolio management?

Writing group

Ruth Burchell
Standards and Frameworks Coordinator   QAA

Adam Child
Head of Academic Quality   Bournemouth University

Dr Lisa Cove-Burrell
Head of Standards and Enhancement
(Taught Programme)   University of Bolton

Louisa Green
Academic Registrar   University of Bedfordshire

Kelly Hand
Head of Quality Operations   Edge Hill University

Jenny Hann
Assistant Director: HE Curriculum & Quality   University Centre Weston

Cerys Jones
Principal Quality Assurance and
Enhancement Officer   University of South Wales

Janet Lloyd
Head of Quality and Enhancement   University of Salford

Helen McLean
Senior Quality Officer   University of the West of Scotland

James Perkins
Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement   The Royal Central School
of Speech and Drama

Andrew Redford
Deputy Head of Quality and Governance   GSM London Ltd