The UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Overview and the Expectations

QAA

The UK Quality Code – developed by QAA in consultation with the HE sector

Over **3,000** contributions were received from the sector during the consultation.

www qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is the nationally agreed, definitive point of reference for all those who deliver or support UK higher education programmes.

It sets out **19 Expectations** that all UK higher education providers are required to meet in the way that is most appropriate for their organisation.

The Quality Code was developed in consultation with the higher education sector and is maintained and published by QAA. It covers all four nations of the UK and all international locations where UK higher education is provided.

The Quality Code **protects the interests of all students**, whatever their level, subject or mode of study. It covers all learning and teaching activities of higher education providers, including the provision of research degrees and the information that a provider makes available to its students.

As the definitive reference point for UK higher education, the Quality Code is useful to students, their unions and representatives in discussions with the university or college about standards and quality at their institution.

The purpose of the UK Quality Code

The Quality Code is intended to assist higher education providers and QAA in:

- safeguarding academic standards

- assuring the academic quality of learning opportunities

- promoting continuous and systematic improvement (enhancement)

- ensuring that information about programmes is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

The Quality Code consists of a **General Introduction** that provides an overview, key features and definitions, and **three parts**.

Each part is made up of individual **Chapters** which contain a rationale and context for each **Expectation**. They are designed to help providers maintain and enhance effective arrangements for the standards and quality of higher education provision.

Each Chapter provides a resource of sound practice, supported by explanatory text, designed to help providers consider effective approaches suitable for them. Providers can reflect on, and develop, their own ways of meeting the Expectations, informed by the sound practice agreed by the sector.

The values of the UK Quality Code

These values put all students at the heart of UK higher education, irrespective of their mode, location, level or subject of study.

treating students with fairness, dignity and respect

providing all students with opportunities to learn

informing students about relevant matters

having transparent and robust policies and processes

exercising responsible governance

ensuring sufficient external scrutiny

supporting staff effectively

How the UK Quality Code is maintained

QAA works with universities, colleges, higher education funding councils, bodies representing the higher education sector, professional bodies and other relevant organisations to ensure that the Quality Code remains up to date.

Any future developments to the Quality Code will draw upon the results of consultation with specialist development and advisory groups, discussion events and online public consultations.

How we developed the UK Quality Code

Scoping events

5 scoping and discussion events brought together quality officers, students, professional bodies and other experts to explore key principles about content.

Advisory groups

230 senior higher education staff helped develop and revise drafts.

Consultation

1,520 academics, students, quality officers and PSRB representatives attended **33 consultation events**.

1,380 people and organisations shared their views online.

Key terminology

Quality assurance – the process for checking that the academic standards and quality of higher education provision meet agreed expectations.

Threshold academic standards – the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for the award of academic credit or a qualification. For equivalent qualifications, the threshold level of achievement is agreed across the UK.

Academic standards – 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. They include the standards of performance that a student needs to demonstrate to achieve a particular classification of a qualification, such as a first-class honours degree classification in a certain subject or the award of merit or distinction in a master's degree.

Academic quality – how, and how well, the higher education provider supports students to enable them to achieve their award. It covers learning, teaching and assessment, and all the different resources and processes a provider puts in place to help students progress and fulfil their potential.

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code

Higher education providers use the UK Quality Code to help them maintain the academic standards of their programmes and qualifications, assure and enhance the quality of learning opportunities, and provide information about their higher education programmes.

UK higher education is diverse, but the Quality Code provides a shared starting point for quality assurance and makes it possible to ensure that higher education provision and learning outcomes are comparable and consistent at a threshold level across the UK.

Individual providers should be able to demonstrate that they are meeting the relevant Expectations effectively through their own management and organisational processes, taking account of the unique needs, traditions, culture and decision-making processes of their organisation.

Providers can use the General Introduction, the Chapter introductions and the Indicators of sound practice, to support them in meeting the Expectations.

Each Chapter of the UK Quality Code, and the Expectation set out within the Chapter, is capable of being applied and adapted to fit the needs and purposes of each individual higher education provider, reflecting its size, mission and culture and the nature of its student body.

The 19 Expectations of the UK Quality Code are given in full on the following pages.

Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards

Part A sets out what is expected of UK degree-awarding bodies in setting and maintaining the academic standards of the qualifications and credit that they award. It identifies the relevant UK and European frameworks, statements and reference points, and explains how these relate to each other and provide a context for the quality assurance of standards.

PART
A

Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards

A1 incorporates the following essential reference points that degree-awarding bodies use to set and maintain threshold academic standards:

- UK Qualifications Frameworks, comprising *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)
- QAA guidance on qualification characteristics, including those on foundation, master's and doctoral degrees
- *Higher Education Credit Framework for England*
- Subject Benchmark Statements for bachelor's and master's degree subjects.

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.

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

A2 focuses on how degree-awarding bodies (DABs) ensure their degree awarding powers are exercised appropriately through having in place effective arrangements for the governance and management of those powers. This includes defining the role and responsibilities of the senior academic authority as the body with the responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards; setting out the governance and management framework for academic standards and quality; and defining how operational functions will be delegated.

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.

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

A3 looks at how DABs ensure that their programmes are designed, approved and assessed in accordance with the UK threshold standards set out in the relevant qualifications framework and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements (A1) and their own standards set out in their academc frameworks and regulations (A2). Monitoring and review of programmes enables DABs to confirm these standards are being maintained. DABs are assisted in fulfilling these responsibilities through engaging effectively with external and independent expertise.

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.

Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality

Part B is concerned with the quality of the learning opportunities that are in place to support students in higher education and enable them to get the most out of their higher education experience. Chapters in Part B follow the programme/student life cycle.

PART
B

Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval

B1 addresses the development of a programme and the processes through which the DAB agrees that it can be delivered in an agreed form (whether by the DAB itself or another provider). It recognises that developing a programme is an iterative process based on reflection and critical self-assessment, drawing on the feedback and engagement of different departments, both academic and professional services.

Expectation B1

Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.

Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education

B2 embodies the principles of fair admission and applies them to all areas of recruitment, selection and admission, and to all programmes and levels of study. It gives prominence to transparency and emphasises that all those engaged in any stage of the process act with integrity and professionalism in all circumstances.

Expectation B2

Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.

Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching

B3 focuses on the way that higher education providers take a strategic approach to promoting the effective engagement of students in their learning. It includes their approach to appointing and supporting staff who are equally engaged in delivering inspirational teaching and facilitating learning.

Expectation B3

Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.

Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement

B4 looks at providers' strategies to supporting students' transitions into, through and beyond higher education. It promotes approaches which are integrated, bringing together professional services so that students are aware of, and can access when they need to, relevant support irrespective of the specific organisational arrangements within the individual provider.

Expectation B4

Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Chapter B5: Student Engagement

B5 focuses on providing opportunities for students to be partners in quality enhancement and assurance processes with the purpose of allowing the views of students, individually and collectively, to inform and improve the student educational experience both for current and future cohorts.

Opportunities are provided to students in a manner and at a level which is appropriate to them, and in an environment in which students are encouraged to take up the opportunities on offer.

Expectation B5

Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning

B6 covers all forms of assessment used in the context of taught provision, and for the recognition of prior learning. It focuses on the processes in place to enable assessment to both promote student learning (including through feedback) and to enable academic staff to make judgements about the extent to which applicable intended learning outcomes have been achieved as the basis for progression to credit and qualifications. It also focuses on how providers engage with students to promote an understanding of good academic practice and an understanding of the complexities of assessment.

Expectation B6

Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Chapter B7: External Examining

B7 addresses the way comment is provided and considered by staff at module, programme and provider level, with feedback provided to the external examiner. Arrangements for external examining reflect the structure, size and approach of the institution with the DAB responsible for making appointments for their provision and any delivered through other providers such as colleges, and also for ensuring effective induction and that the examiner has all the information needed to fulfil their role. This helps to ensure the independence of the appointee and avoid possible conflicts of interest.

The Chapter embodies the recommendations of the UUK/Guild HE review of external examining (chaired by Dame Janet Finch), which reported in 2011.

Expectation B7

Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.

Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review

B8 focuses on the operation and effectiveness of each provider's arrangements that ensure learning opportunities provided to students are appropriate, including in enabling the intended learning outcomes of the programme to be achieved. A regular and planned cycle of monitoring and review also enables providers to evaluate student attainment of academic standards and allow higher education providers to confirm that their portfolio aligns with their mission and strategic priorities.

Processes also provide an effective means for capturing and responding to the student voice, through whatever means that is expressed and whether by individual students or through collective or representative arrangements.

Expectation B8

Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.

Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints

B9 looks at the arrangements higher education providers make to address appeals and complaints by students relating to their academic experience, including (for complaints) using, where appropriate, informal or alternative approaches. Providers also use appeals and complaints as a source of feedback, which can contribute to their enhancement of learning opportunities.

The Chapter takes account of the requirements of schemes or arrangements for external independent review such as the Office of the Independent Adjudicator in England and Wales, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman in Scotland, and the Visitor in Northern Ireland.

Expectation B9

Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.

Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others

B10 reflects the fact that DABs engage in an increasingly diverse range of arrangements with other DABs, higher education providers and other bodies (such as employers) to deliver or enable the delivery of programmes leading to their qualifications. As such, it embodies the principle of proportionality, that sound practice reflects the extent and nature, likely risk of each arrangement, with careful consideration given at the outset to the responsibilities of each party in relation to securing standards, the student learning experience, and the information provided to students and other stakeholders. These responsibilities are recorded in a formal written agreement.

Expectation B10

Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.

Chapter B11: Research Degrees

B11 provides additional considerations applicable to research degree provision (doctorates and research master's degrees) and is applicable to whatever arrangements are used to deliver the learning opportunities, for example through a graduate school or doctoral training centre. Key aspects of providers' arrangements are those for supervision, assessment and training and for accepting research students only where there is an environment that provides support for doing and learning about research, and where excellent research, recognised by the relevant subject community, is occurring.

Expectation B11

Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.

Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Part C focuses on the range of information that higher education providers make available about their provision for different audiences in different formats.

PART
C

Part C looks at the information that is publicly available to ensure transparency and information which is tailored to specific audiences, such as prospective students to help them make informed choices and to current students. A key element of ensuring the appropriateness of the information – both content and how it is made available – is through engagement with each audience.

It also addresses the recording and reporting of student achievement in official documents, such as the transcript, Higher Education Achievement Report or Diploma Supplement.

Expectation C

Higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

Build Your Own Quality Code

QAA is working in partnership with providers to develop a number of resources which help them to embed the Quality Code into their own self-assurance methods and ongoing practice.

The Build Your Own Quality Code facility enables you to tailor a PDF to your own particular needs, by selecting the elements of the Quality Code that are most useful to you.

www **qaa.ac.uk/build-your-own-quality-code**

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