



UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Advice and Guidance

Assessment



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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

Formative assessment: Assessment with a developmental purpose, designed to help learners learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance and how it can be improved and/or maintained. Reflective practice by students sometimes contributes to formative assessment.

Summative assessment: Used to indicate the extent of a learner's success in meeting the assessment criteria to gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or course. Typically, within summative assessment, the marks awarded count towards the final mark of the course/module/award.

Module: A self-contained, formally structured unit of study, with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Some providers use the word 'course' to refer to individual modules.

Expectations and Practices

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

Assessment is a fundamental aspect of the student learning experience. Engagement in assessment activities and interaction with staff and peers enables learning, both as part of the task and through review of their performance. It is a vehicle for obtaining feedback. Ultimately, it determines whether each student has achieved their course's learning outcomes and allows the awarding body to ensure that appropriate standards are being applied rigorously. Deliberate, systematic quality assurance ensures that assessment processes, standards and any other criteria are applied consistently and equitably, with reliability, validity and fairness.

The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework.

Assessment ensures that the qualifications are awarded only to those students who meet specified learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are specified for each course, which are consistent with the relevant national qualification frameworks' descriptors, and assessment determines whether each student has achieved them.

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.

Assessment regimes include processes ensuring the qualifications awarded by a degree-awarding body are consistent with the standards recognised within the sector and continue to be so over time. This consistency is important for the value of a qualification and the trust stakeholders place in it.

Core practices

- **The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks.**
- **The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.**

In practice, this means that learning outcomes are specified for each course, consistent with the relevant national qualification frameworks' descriptors, and assessment determines whether each student has achieved them. Providers operate processes that ensure learning outcomes are consistent with the requirements of the relevant national qualifications frameworks. They ensure assessments measure the extent to which students achieve the learning outcomes both at, and beyond, the threshold level. Providers also ensure measurement and representation of students' achievement beyond the threshold is reasonably comparable with those of other UK providers - via external examining and the use of external input and/or reference points in course design and assessment frameworks.

- **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 degree-awarding bodies remain responsible for the academic standards of all credit and qualifications granted in their name; this responsibility is never delegated. They ensure that any partner involved in design or delivery of assessment understands and follows the requirements they approve.

- **The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.**

In practice, this means that providers operate processes for assessment and classification that ensure student achievement is measured reliably, fairly and transparently. They use external examiners for independent confirmation that their processes have been applied appropriately, and ensure qualifications have been awarded equitably and in accordance with national standards. Providers also make sure assessment policies and procedures are published and readily accessible to all stakeholders.

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 providers regularly review and enhance their assessment policies, procedures and processes as they relate to standards to ensure they remain fit for purpose. They consider and act on reports of external examiners and focus on assessment in their course reviews.

Expectations for quality

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

Courses are designed so that curricula, learning outcomes and assessment are aligned with each other, enabling reliable assessment and an effective learning experience. Assessment measures accurately and consistently, the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes for the course.

From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.

Assessment supports students' learning: it is designed to enable students to learn through preparing for and undertaking the assessment and from feedback on their performance in the assessment.

Core practices

- **The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.**
In practice, this means that providers operate processes that ensure learning outcomes are consistent with the requirements of the relevant national qualification frameworks. They ensure that assessment measures the learning outcomes for the course, supports students' learning, and is appropriately tailored to different environments, for example, in the workplace for some apprenticeships. Providers operate effective institutional policies and procedures on assessment design and delivery.
- **The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.**
In practice, this means that providers ensure that recruitment, progression and development of staff involved in teaching and assessment includes consideration of their knowledge and expertise in assessment.

Common practices

- **The provider reviews its core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**
- **The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.**
- **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 providers regularly review and enhance assessment policies, procedures and processes as they relate to quality, to ensure they remain fit for purpose and take account of changing circumstance, demands and pedagogical developments. They consider and act on reports of external examiners, focus on assessment in their course reviews, and engage students in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their student experience.

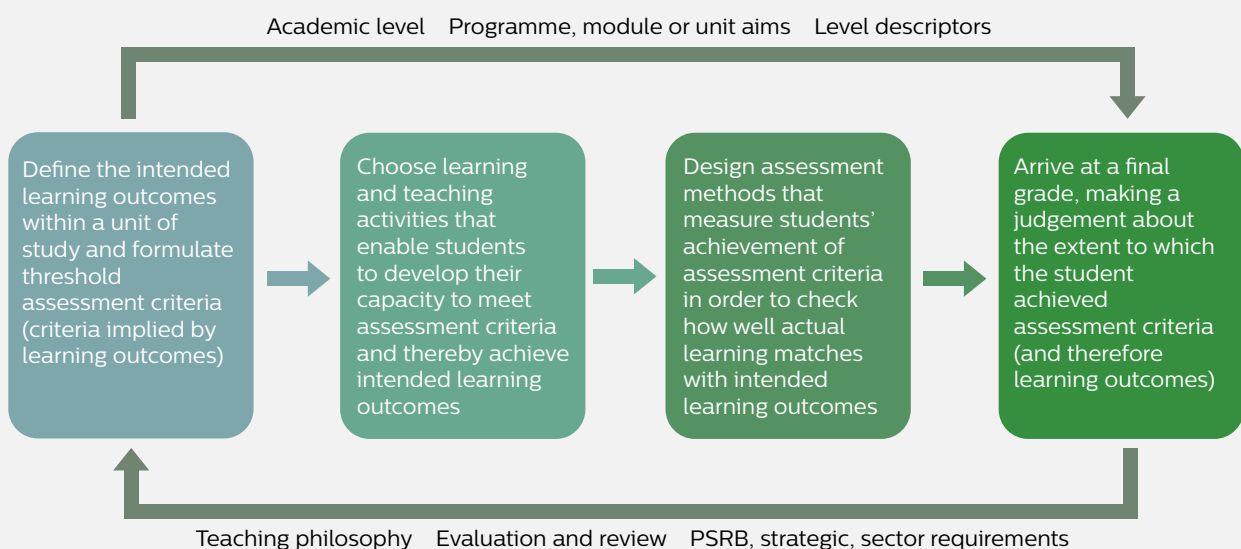
Guiding principles

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 Assessment methods and criteria are aligned to learning outcomes and teaching activities.

There is alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching strategies, methods of assessment and assessment criteria. Constructive alignment is a model where learning environments and activities are designed to enable all students to achieve the desired learning outcomes, measured through assessment activities using clearly aligned criteria. Learning outcomes, assessment criteria and learning and teaching activities are developed in accordance with the academic level of study, using appropriate descriptors and consistent language. They reflect course and module aims as well as other factors where appropriate, such as professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements. Figure 1 outlines the four major steps to constructive alignment.

Figure 1: The four major steps to constructive alignment.



2 Assessment is reliable, consistent, fair and valid.

The assessment process is objective and repeatable over time. All assessment activities have clearly articulated assessment criteria, weightings and level descriptors that are understood by all students and staff involved in the assessment process. To ensure equity, academic standards for each award are rigorously set and maintained at the appropriate level (in accordance with the relevant national qualification frameworks). Awards at the same level are comparable in terms of qualification and level descriptors, assessment criteria, Subject Benchmark Statements, and, where applicable, PSRB requirements. Assessment criteria are sufficiently robust to ensure reasonable parity between the judgements of different assessors. Policies and procedures for marking assessments and moderating marks are clearly articulated, consistently operated and regularly reviewed. Where borderline marks are identified, policies for the consideration of grades to be awarded are consistent, fair and freely available to staff and students. The validity of an assessment – how well a test measures what it claims to measure – is reviewed through annual and periodic review, supported by external subject specialists and external examiners.

3**Assessment design is approached holistically.**

Assessment is designed ‘top down’ – beginning with the award, then going down into module level (where appropriate). Assessment design considers all modes of course delivery and environment, including where employers may be involved in assessment for work-based learning programmes such as apprenticeships. Variety in modes of assessment meets a need, based on academic judgement, and is not just for the sake of variety. Variety helps develop a range of skills and competencies and assesses a range of learning styles – the variety itself should not become a barrier to learning. Assessment design needs to develop across stages as the student develops, as well as levels of study, as part of the overarching award design process and on an ongoing basis.

4**Assessment is inclusive and equitable.**

Every student has an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement through the assessment process, with no group or individual disadvantaged. In designing assessments, the needs of students are considered, including those studying at different locations, from different cultural/ educational backgrounds, with additional learning needs, or with protected characteristics. Assessment procedures and methods are flexible enough to allow adjustments to overcome any substantial disadvantage that individual students could experience.

5**Assessment is explicit and transparent.**

Assessment policies, regulations and processes are explicit, transparent and accessible to all staff and students involved in the assessment process. Students are clearly informed of the purpose and requirements of each assessment task and the standards expected. Feedback on assessments explicitly relates to the stated learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and students have the necessary support to understand and interpret assessment criteria and how these are used to enable staff to recognise differential student achievement.

6**Assessment and feedback is purposeful and supports the learning process.**

Assessment relates directly to course aims and learning outcomes, reflecting the nature of the discipline or subject and ensuring that students have opportunities to develop a range of knowledge, skills and attributes. Assessment is fit for purpose and methods are valid in measuring achievement against learning outcomes. Assessment enables students to benchmark their current level of knowledge or skills, identify areas for improvement and make judgements about the overall progress made. Feedback (including ‘feed-forward’) reflects attainment relevant to learning outcomes and marking criteria for the assessment task. Feedback on assessment builds on dialogue and opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. The teaching and assessment strategy progressively enhances students’ assessment literacy to enable them to increasingly regulate their own learning and performance.

7**Assessment is timely.**

Assessment tasks and feedback are timed appropriately to promote student learning and facilitate improvement. Students are given sufficient time and opportunity to engage in learning and teaching activities that build their capacity for assessment. A holistic view of assessment deadlines can help to ensure that they are timed appropriately, to avoid over-burdening students. Expectations in relation to feedback and feedback turnaround time for each assessment are consistent and clearly articulated. Feedback comments are provided in sufficient time to enable students to enhance their performance in subsequent assessment tasks.

8 Assessment is efficient and manageable.

The scheduling of assignments and the amount of assessed work required provides a reliable and valid profile of achievement without overloading students or staff involved in the assessment process. Assessment requirements take into account the notional learning hours for any given unit of study. The spread, number and methods of assessment are considered with other, concurrent modules in mind to ensure that the burden of assessment is not excessive. For example, an overview of assessment deadlines across the course of study is taken to avoid 'bunching' where possible, given students' choice around modules.

9 Students are supported and prepared for assessment.

Students are given opportunities to develop assessment literacy, practise subject-related skills and knowledge, engage with content and develop the competencies required to meet learning outcomes. This often involves formative assessment opportunities. Students are provided with appropriately timed feedback that is understandable, constructive and helps them meet their developmental needs.

10 Assessment encourages academic integrity.

Assessment is designed to minimise opportunities for students to commit academic misconduct, including plagiarism, self-plagiarism and contract cheating. Wherever possible, a suitable variety of assessment methods should be used, to minimise the availability of opportunities for students to incorporate plagiarised work by another author, or previous work by the student, either within the level of study or across levels. Policies and procedures relevant to academic integrity are clear, accessible and actively promoted rather than simply made available.

Practical advice

This section provides practical, contextualised advice to providers on assessment. Where relevant, we have indicated which 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.

Policies and procedures (Guiding principles 2, 3, 5, 10)

Providers operate effective assessment policies, regulations and processes which underpin the setting and maintenance of academic standards and take account of relevant sector guidance. They may include information about exam boards, degree classifications and algorithms.

These documents are explicit, transparent and accessible to all audiences, including students, academic and administrative staff, external examiners, representatives of PSRBs, and employers and others outside higher education.

Reflective question

- Are your policies and procedures explicit, transparent and accessible to all audiences?

Professional standards of staff (Guiding principles 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10)

Providers ensure, through recruitment processes and staff development, that everyone involved in the assessment of student work and associated processes is competent to undertake their roles and fulfil their responsibilities. Assessment involves the exercise of professional judgement by academic staff in marking and moderating student work and in providing feedback, and academic staff develop and confirm their shared understandings of professional judgements through developmental activities. The [UK Professional Standards Framework for Higher Education](#) is a reference point for professional practice and development in respect of assessment.

Reflective question

- How do you ensure that everyone involved in the assessment of student work and associated processes is competent to undertake their roles and fulfil their responsibilities?

Assessment literacy (Guiding principles 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10)

Staff and students engage in dialogue to promote a shared understanding of the basis on which academic judgements are made. Engaging students and making use of examples and/or self and peer-assessment activities, where appropriate, helps students to understand the process of assessment and the expected standards, and to develop their assessment literacy. This helps students to develop their ability to evaluate, and improve on, their performance. It contributes to students' confidence that assessment is fair and consistent, and is designed to be inclusive.

Students are provided with opportunities to develop an understanding of, and the necessary skills to demonstrate, good academic practice and integrity. Assessment literacy helps students to become confident in recognising and applying good academic practice, and be clear about the types of activity which are unacceptable.

Key aspects of good academic practice include:

- acknowledging the ideas of others through appropriate referencing and citation
- meeting expectations about ethical behaviour
- fulfilling confidentiality requirements in particular subjects
- understanding the permitted boundaries between individual and group contributions.

Formative opportunities and feedback can be informal (for instance, classroom or seminar activities) or more formal (for example, an essay, self-assessment, reflective blog or report). They may or may not be graded. Regardless of the approach used, assessment is timed appropriately so that students are given sufficient opportunity to apply formative feedback and improve their performance in the subsequent summative task. Use of formative assessment at an early stage of the module can provide an indication of how well students are engaging and enable early identification of who may need additional support.

Reflective question

- What steps do you take to develop the assessment literacy of your students and your staff?

Assessment design (Guiding principles 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10)

Effective design of assessment ensures that course-level learning outcomes (which themselves fulfil the requirements of, where appropriate, the relevant qualification frameworks, credit framework, Subject Benchmark Statements, and guidance on qualifications' characteristics) are addressed through the assessment of the course and/or through the assessment of the course's constituent units or modules.

The weighting, volume, timing and types of assessment tasks, and the clarity of assessment criteria are important factors in enabling students to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes and in maintaining the standards of awards. The timing of reassessment opportunities, where these are permitted, allow students sufficient time to engage in further learning following the initial assessment, while not delaying unduly students' opportunities to progress within, or complete, their course.

Reflective question

- How effective is your approach to assessment in measuring the course learning outcomes, and meeting nationally-agreed sector reference points?

Inclusive assessment (Guiding principles 2, 4, 9)

Assessment tasks provide every student with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of learning outcomes through inclusive design wherever feasible and through individual reasonable adjustments as required. In designing assessments, consideration is given to all students, including those with protected characteristics. Barriers which impede access to assessments (such as biased language, inaccessibility and cultural assumptions) are avoided or removed. Inclusive design implies a more strategic approach, which reduces the likelihood of making one-off, reactive modifications. Individual modifications are made where necessary and appropriate, but reliance on reactive modifications can place both students and staff under additional pressure and increases the risk of inequities.

Providers monitor and evaluate inclusive assessment practices across modules, courses, and their academic departments, and incorporate consequent learning in their policies, procedures and practices. They facilitate staff access to sources of advice, both from within the provider and externally, about inclusive assessment strategies and practices, and assessment implications for individual students (see also [Monitoring and Evaluation](#) Theme).

Reflective question

- How do you ensure that assessment tasks are sufficiently inclusive, giving all students fair opportunities to demonstrate the course learning outcomes without any barriers to access?

Feedback to students (Guiding principles 6, 7)

Feedback on assessment is timely, constructive and developmental. While some assessment may be classed as entirely formative, summative assessment often includes a formative element. Effective feedback enables students to understand the strengths and limitations of their performance, and to recognise how future performance can be improved. Mutually constructed feedback can engage students in their feedback and their own learning. The process includes helping students understand how to make effective use of feedback.

Reflective question

- How do you assure yourself that your feedback for students is timely, constructive and developmental?

Security (Guiding principle 10)

Assessment is carried out securely. Staff carry out all aspects of assessment in a way that ensures the integrity of the assessment process and, in turn, the integrity of the academic standards of each award.

Key areas of potential risk to the integrity of assessment are:

- transit of draft assessment questions/tasks between staff and between campuses and transit of materials to external examiners
- invigilation of examinations
- confirming the identity of students undertaking assessments, whether in an examination room or online, and when student work is submitted in person, online or through other means.

Students' marks and related information (such as extenuating circumstances applications) are held securely and disclosed only to those who need access and have a right to see it.

Reflective question

- What measures do you have in place to ensure the security of your assessments?

Language of assessment (Guiding principle 4)

Degree-awarding bodies assure themselves that the standards of their awards are not compromised as a result of conducting assessment in a language other than the language of tuition. Where this happens, academic standards may be compromised where staff, especially those marking or moderating student work, do not have sufficient competence in the language in question. Providers may wish to consult guidance on assessment in a language other than that of tuition. Staff involved in assessing students, and external examiners, have the necessary subject knowledge and expertise in the relevant language. Translation is avoided wherever possible; where it is necessary, degree-awarding bodies ensure that effective mechanisms are in place to assure the reliability and validity of assessment outcomes.

Reflective question

- How do you assure yourselves that the standards of your awards are secured where assessment is conducted in a language other than that of tuition?

Marking and moderation (Guiding principles 1, 2)

Processes for marking assessments and for moderating marks are clearly articulated and consistently operated by those involved in the assessment process.

Regulations and guidance govern, for example:

- processes for first and second marking
- how agreement will be reached on the final marks awarded
- the use of anonymous marking and the point at which anonymity is lifted
- how borderline marks are defined, both in individual assessments and in overall results for a module or course, and what is done with them
- fairness of outcomes in assessment of group working and projects.

Internal moderation is a process separate from marking and provides assurance that assessment criteria have been applied appropriately, reflecting the shared understanding of the markers. It can, where appropriate, enable comparability of outcomes across academic subjects, for instance, in recognising that students may be studying more than one subject. Moderation focuses on the marks awarded to the full set of assessed work for a task, module or course, in the context of the academic standards for the award. It is therefore separate from the question of how differences in marks between two or more markers are resolved, and is not about making changes to an individual student's marks.

Staff are clear how moderation will be conducted, for example, through sampling assessed work, reviewing all the marks awarded, and providing opportunities for discussion between moderators to develop shared understandings. They are also clear about what action might be taken where significant differences in marks awarded are identified. Clear guidance sets out requirements in relation to moderating assessment, such as a performance or a presentation, which does not produce physical evidence. For courses involving a delivery organisation, the degree-awarding body is responsible for specifying its requirements for moderation, and ensuring that they are met.

Reflective question

- How do you assure yourself that your processes for marking and moderation are clearly articulated and consistently operated?

Academic integrity (Guiding principle 10)

Providers operate effective processes for promoting academic integrity and identifying, investigating and responding to unacceptable academic practice. Providers implement effective measures to encourage students to develop and internalise academic values and good academic practice.

Practical steps include:

- avoiding the recycling of work and assessments too regularly
- training invigilators appropriately
- having good exam room etiquette and procedures in place, as well as appropriate security measures for exam questions
- making everyone aware of the consequences of cheating.

Ensuring that students do not obtain credit or awards through any form of unacceptable academic practice relating to assessment (including plagiarism, cheating in exams, contract cheating, collusion and impersonation) is fundamental to securing academic standards. Familiarity with students' work, which can identify when students have used assistance or commissioned work, is balanced with the principle of anonymous marking.

Providers implement clear processes through which unacceptable practice can be reported by anyone with relevant knowledge and investigated objectively and fairly. Students about whom a concern has been raised have the opportunity to put their case, challenge the evidence and its interpretation, and offer mitigation. Penalties for proven cases of unacceptable practice are clear, proportionate and consistently and equitably applied. Academic misconduct processes take account of factors related to protected characteristics. Providers ensure that requirements of PSRBs are taken into account in cases of academic misconduct. Providers may wish to consult QAA guidance on academic integrity, for example, [Contracting to cheat in higher education](#).

Reflective question

- How do you ensure that you operate effective processes for promoting academic integrity and identifying, investigating and responding to academic misconduct?

Examination boards (Guiding principles 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10)

Degree-awarding bodies operate, or oversee the operation of, examination boards (or equivalent bodies) to make judgements and decisions on which the award of credit and qualifications is ultimately based. The powers, authority and accountability of the board are clearly specified and understood by members of the board.

Regulations and procedures make explicit the degree-awarding body's requirements for:

- membership of internal and external examiners and other staff, and attendance at meetings
- the quorum of the meeting and how inquoracy will be dealt with
- chair's action provision, its limitations, and the recording and reporting of such decisions
- the exercise of discretion by boards.

Provision is made to enable conflicts of interest (such as personal interests or relationships with students) to be identified and addressed.

Boards of examiners apply fairly and consistently regulations for progression within, and transfer between, courses and for the award of credits and qualifications. Regulations will make clear:

- how assessment results will be used to determine the award and classification of a qualification
- how assessment results will be used in terms of progression, whether or not it is possible for a student to progress to the next stage of the award with one or more failed modules outstanding
- any pre-requisite or co-requisite requirements
- the number of reassessment opportunities permitted
- whether or not any limit is placed on the maximum marks which can be achieved in a reassessment.

A record is kept of decisions and of the factors taken into account in the exercise of discretion by the board. Regulations make explicit how applications from students with extenuating circumstances are dealt with, including whether or not new assessment attempts are allowed and assessment elements disregarded.

Reflective questions

- How do you ensure your examination boards understand their powers, authority and accountability?
- How do you maintain records of examination board decisions?

Enhancement (Guiding principle 1)

Working with students, providers systematically evaluate and enhance their assessment policies, regulations and processes. Appropriate training and support should be given to enable students to engage fully with the activities (see also [Student Engagement](#) Theme).

Assessment and feedback practices are informed by reflection, consideration of professional practice, and subject-specific and educational scholarship. Consideration is given to external examiners' reports, feedback from students, changing external factors (including requirements of PSRBs) and pedagogical developments. Student achievement and academic standards are monitored and compared over time, and this analysis informs the evaluation and enhancement of assessment policies. When introducing changes to the regulations, degree-awarding bodies meet their contractual obligations to students.

Reflective question

- What steps do you take to ensure the systematic evaluation and enhancement of your assessment policies, regulations and processes?

Recognition of prior learning (Guiding principles 2, 3)

Information on opportunities for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is readily accessible to potential applicants, and guidance and support in applying for RPL is provided.

Regulations and requirements in relation to RPL are clear and explicit. They include:

- reference to minimum and maximum limits on the award of credit or exemption through RPL
- whether and how RPL will be graded
- how credit and exemptions will be used for the purposes of progression and for the award and classification of qualifications
- processes for investigating allegations of fraudulent applications for RPL
- processes for considering appeals against RPL decisions.

Where RPL meets the requirements for learning outcomes for the relevant part of the course, it is consistent with national reference points.

Reflective question

- Are your regulations and requirements in relation to RPL clear, explicit, and readily accessible to potential applicants? What guidance and support do you provide to applicants?

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting (Guiding principles 1,2)

Providers systematically review, evaluate and enhance their assessment policies, regulations and processes, using a range of quantitative and qualitative data. They report the outcomes through their academic governance structures to provide assurance to the governing body and externally of the robustness and validity of their assessment and qualification outcomes. How this takes place, and ensures continuous improvement, should be clearly articulated in procedures.

Qualitative data may include external examiners' reports, student survey outcomes and internal review outcomes. Quantitative data might include noting the key features of mark, grade and honours distributions, identifying any relationship between student entry qualifications and assessment outcomes, and differential performance of students (see also [Monitoring and Evaluation](#) Theme).

Reflective question

- Do your procedures clearly articulate how monitoring, evaluation and reporting takes place and how it ensures continuous improvement?

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