The UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Advice and Guidance

Sector-Agreed **Principle 7** - Designing, developing, approving, and modifying programmes

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About this Guidance

Context

This Advice and Guidance supports the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and is designed to unpack **Sector-Agreed Principle 7 - Designing, developing, approving, and modifying programmes** and the Key Practices that sit under it. It has been produced by QAA in partnership with a writing group of sector experts and peer-reviewed by colleagues across UK higher education. This is in accordance with the ethos that the Quality Code remains a sector-agreed reference point, built on a shared understanding of what providers can expect of themselves and each other in the assurance and enhancement of quality and the maintenance of standards across post-secondary education throughout the UK. QAA would like to thank the writing group and peer readers for their invaluable contribution in developing this guidance. Details of the writing and reading groups can be found on page 68 of this guidance

An important contextual note relates to the diversity of higher education providers in the UK. Providers can be large universities, operating with significant infrastructure, or small specialist providers, operating on a significantly smaller scale, or any number of other different operating models. The Advice and Guidance is designed to be useful for all providers (and representatives from a range of providers formed the writing and peer review groups), but we recognise that, on occasion, the nomenclature used could suggest a larger provider's context. It is important that each reader interprets the Advice and Guidance in the context of their own operating environment and that all readers recognise that quality and homogeneity are not synonymous.

Scope

This Advice and Guidance encourages providers to reflect on their practice and processes in relation to the Sector-Agreed Principle. Following the Advice and Guidance is not mandatory, but illustrative of approaches that can help providers meet the relevant Principle. National regulators and QAA do not view the information in the Advice and Guidance as compliance indicators. This guidance does not interpret statutory requirements.

The language we use

Where the word 'should' (or any other similarly directive language) appears in the Advice and Guidance this represents a shared understanding within the UK higher education community. On some occasions an institution can align with the Sector-Agreed Principle in a range of different ways, and in such cases an institution may have a different approach to that set out here. Ultimately, to be aligned with the Quality Code, an institution must be able to demonstrate how it meets the Sector-Agreed Principles in practice. No provider or individual should feel that the Advice and Guidance is prescriptive or impinges their autonomy or freedoms.

Structure

In response to sector demand, the Advice and Guidance aligns directly with the overarching Sector-Agreed Principles to provide clear navigation between the different elements. The guidance begins by unpacking the Principle in an operational context. It is then divided into subsections focusing on each Key Practice outlining practical considerations and approaches for providers to benchmark their own way of working. This features practical tips and experience shared by providers on operational practice. Finally, in each subsection there are tools to enable reflection on the guidance. These tools offer the opportunity to explore what 'good' might look like through reflective questions and practical scenarios that enable interrogation of current practice with a view to enhancing quality.

Commonly used terms

The following terms are used throughout this advice. Other terms which benefit from a precise definition are listed at the end of this document.

- **Students**: refers to all individuals studying towards a higher-level award regardless of demographic, mode of delivery, level of study, subject area, or geographic location.
- **Provider**: describes all types of organisations that provide higher level learning, including universities, colleges, institutes of learning, and employers. We also use 'institution' in some instances where 'provider' might not suit the context.
- **Awarding body**: describes education institutions with degree awarding powers.
- **Student representative body**: a formal body or mechanism that represents and promotes the interests of students. This may be known as a students' union, a students' association, or guild, or by another bespoke name where these specific organisations do not exist.

Sector-Agreed Principle 7 and its Key Practices

Providers design, develop, approve and modify programmes and modules to ensure the quality of provision and the academic standards of awards are consistent with the relevant Qualifications Framework. Providers ensure their provision and level of qualifications are comparable to those offered across the UK and, where applicable, The Framework of Qualifications for The European Higher Education Area.

Key Practices

a. All programmes and modules meet academic standards that are consistent with relevant national qualifications and credit frameworks. Where applicable, provision also meets professional body and accreditation requirements, and apprenticeship standards.

b. A definitive set of documents are produced from the design, development, approval and modification processes, which are held securely and act as the primary source of information about each programme. Similar but proportionate arrangements are in place for modules and smaller units of study.

c. The award to be received and how outcomes of study are recorded and certificated are made clear to all students and staff involved in the teaching, learning and evaluation of the programme and module.

d. Policies and processes that support the design, development, approval and modification of programmes and modules are published on each provider's website and are easily accessible to key stakeholders.

e. External engagement and evaluation form a component part of the design, development, approval and modification process.

f. The design, development, approval and modification processes align with providers' policies and practices on equity, equality, diversity and inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

g. Students are involved meaningfully in the design, development, approval and modification of programmes and modules.

Principle 7 - Designing, developing, approving and monitoring programmes

Providers design, develop, approve and modify programmes and modules to ensure the quality of provision and the academic standards of awards are consistent with the relevant Qualifications Framework. Providers ensure their provision and level of qualifications are comparable to those offered across the UK and, where applicable, The Framework of Qualifications for The European Higher Education Area.

Degree-awarding bodies hold ultimate responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards, and for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities. This is carried out using providers' own processes for programme design, development, approval and modification. Principle 7 supports providers in fulfilling these responsibilities in line with their mission, values and strategic objectives to create contextually unique, contemporary, market-attractive academic portfolios. This guidance also applies to any partner or organisation involved in programme delivery.

The Key Practices below promote the development and implementation of robust processes for programme design, approval, development and modification. Through a set of reflective questions, this guidance can also be used to assess the effectiveness of these processes.

In this guidance, 'programme' refers to a coherent course of study leading to the award of academic credit. Depending on provider context, this may include full awards (for example, certificates, diplomas and degrees), modules, groups of modules, micro-credentials, or other units of higher-level study that contribute to an award or recognised credit.

Programme design is a creative and iterative process informed by a clear understanding of student and employer needs. Alongside relevant qualification frameworks and professional/industry standards, effective programme development involves consultation with key stakeholders, including students, external subject specialists, employers, and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). This ensures alignment with contemporary research, professional and industry practice, pedagogical and technological advancements and current approaches to sustainability and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Providers typically consider the academic, strategic and financial viability of proposed programmes before detailed design begins. This may include analysis of student demand, employer or community need, resource requirements, sustainability of staffing, and alignment with institutional mission and portfolio priorities. These early viability processes are outside the scope of this guidance.

Key Practice a - Academic standards and PSRB requirements

Key Practice a

Academic standards and PSRB requirements

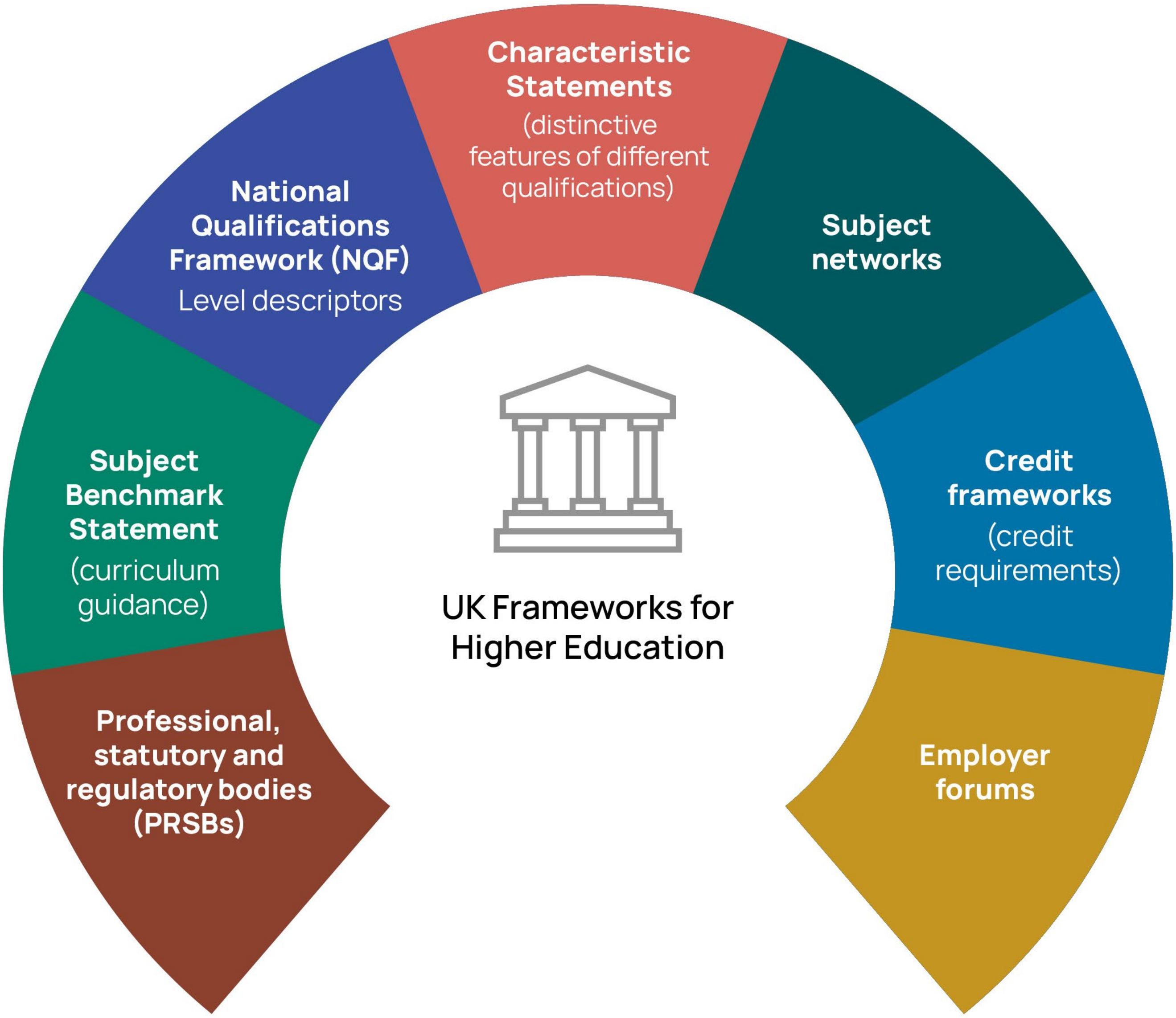
All programmes and modules meet academic standards that are consistent with relevant national qualifications and credit frameworks. Where applicable, provision also meets professional body and accreditation requirements, and apprenticeship standards.

Providers are responsible for ensuring that the academic standards of their awards are consistent with their relevant national qualifications and credit frameworks (Figure 1). Effective use of these frameworks ensures the level of qualifications awarded are comparable to those offered across the UK and beyond, as described in The Framework of Qualifications for The European Higher Education Area.

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.

National reference points for programme design and development

Figure 1: Reference points to inform programme design, development, approval and modification



The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies set out generic threshold standards for different types of qualification awarded at academic Levels 4-8 (FHEQ) or 8-12 (SCQF/FQHEIS). They are generic level descriptors which illustrate the understanding, skills and attributes that a student should be able to demonstrate on completion of a particular level of study. Level descriptors are statements of outcomes, and when viewed collectively, they show an increasing level of intellectual demand or academic progression from Certificates of Higher Education, through undergraduate studies and to doctoral level. They are not subject-specific and can therefore be applied across subjects. Methodical use of such level descriptors during programme design means that student achievement at all providers of higher education is broadly equivalent at threshold level. Achievement beyond threshold standards is usually defined by institutions' marking criteria. Outcome Classification Descriptions, included in Annex D of the Frameworks, provide a common description of the four main degree outcome classifications for bachelor's degrees with honours - 1st, 2.1, 2.2 and 3rd. These statements build upon the descriptors in the national Qualification Frameworks.

Characteristics Statements describe the distinctive features and structures of different qualification types awarded at levels within the Qualifications Frameworks. These statements are used when designing, developing and approving new programmes as they describe the qualifications in terms of their purpose, general characteristics and generic outcomes. Characteristics Statements may be of particular help to demonstrate that standards are appropriately established for interdisciplinary and innovative programmes for which there are no directly relevant subject-specific external reference points (also see Subject Benchmark Statements below). Revised Characteristics Statements are being published across 2026 and 2027 which will align with the QF-EHEA descriptors of short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle. This alignment supports the UK's ongoing commitment to the Bologna Process by promoting transparency, comparability and international recognition of higher education qualifications across the European Higher Education Area.

National Credit Frameworks provide a consistent method for defining both the volume and the academic level of learning required to achieve higher education qualifications across the UK. While not mandatory for every higher education provider, these credit frameworks are widely used and contribute to the standardisation of academic programmes. They specify the typical credit requirements for different types of academic awards, ensuring consistency in the way qualifications are structured and awarded.

There are three main credit frameworks:

- the Higher Education Credit Framework for England (which is also often used by providers in Northern Ireland as a reference)
- the Credit and Qualifications Framework (CQFW) in Wales, and
- the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

The adoption of credit frameworks facilitates alignment with international systems, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). This alignment supports student mobility and the recognition of UK qualifications abroad, making it easier for students to transfer credits and for employers and institutions to understand the value of UK qualifications in a global context.

Programme teams use credit frameworks when designing, developing and approving programmes to quantify students' workload and to ensure that the curriculum is appropriately scoped and coherent for the intended qualification. For example, by systematically mapping learning outcomes and assessment strategies to the relevant credit level and volume, institutions can demonstrate that their awards meet national expectations.

Subject Benchmark Statements address the specific requirements of academic disciplines, including subject content and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. These Statements provide a structured framework to guide considerations regarding the knowledge, skills and understanding that graduates are expected to possess upon completion of their studies, while allowing programme developers flexibility to select relevant elements, allowing them to tailor their programmes to meet specific needs and objectives.

Engaging with national reference points

Providers use these reference points, along with internal guidance and relevant PSRB standards or apprenticeship standards, to design, develop, approve and update programmes and modules as needed. For example, academic staff use them to define programme aims, content and learning outcomes at the appropriate academic level; and quality assurance teams use them to design processes to verify that academic standards have been set appropriately at the point of validation (approval).

Effective engagement with external reference points may be demonstrated during programme design and approval in the following ways:

- **naming conventions:** confirming that the programme is named in accordance with established titling conventions
- **alignment of learning outcomes with appropriate level:** checking that intended learning outcomes are both measurable and clearly articulated, reflecting the appropriate academic level of the qualification under consideration
- **alignment of subject content and assessment strategies:** confirming their alignment with the intended learning outcomes, ensuring that they collectively support the justification of the award title and any alternative (break-point) awards
- **accessibility of curriculum and assessment:** ensuring that curriculum and assessment strategies are designed to provide all students with the opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes, promoting inclusivity and fairness
- **volume of learning:** verifying that the volume of learning is sufficient to allow for the reliable assessment of the intended learning outcomes
- **programme coherence:** reviewing the overall programme of study to confirm it is coherent and in alignment with the programme aims and award title
- **marking criteria:** writing marking criteria at each academic level that reflect the degree outcome classification descriptions, providing clear guidance for both students and staff regarding expectations and standards of achievement.

Strategic oversight

Strategic oversight ensures that course design, development and approval processes and outcomes remain consistent and transparent. Ownership and oversight of these processes are typically the responsibility of a senior academic committee (such as the Senate or Academic Board). Responsibility for the implementation of institutions' strategies for academic standards and quality enhancement may be usefully delegated to more operational committees and subcommittees as determined by institutional governance structures. The effectiveness of these structures and processes relies upon the commitment and contributions of many members of the providers' community, both directly and indirectly.

The secretariat (or equivalent) function for the academic governance structure is typically provided by quality assurance or governance teams who have operational responsibility for ensuring that outputs from course design, development and approval processes are appropriately reported.

Key considerations for senior oversight committee business plans may include:

- a reminder that they hold overall responsibility for academic standards and external validity of programmes and awards
- the consideration and monitoring of national reference points and other publications, including, where relevant, their evaluation for the purposes of enhancement and/or compliance
- responsibility for, and formulation of, programme design and approval processes, including the way good practice is surfaced and how feedback on proposed procedural improvements is captured, evaluated and used
- strategies for the development and training of staff
- definitive documentation and reporting requirements
- how the final approval of newly validated or modified provision is communicated internally.

Engaging with PSRB or apprenticeship standards/frameworks

Where applicable, programme teams also draw on relevant professional and industry standards when designing learning outcomes, subject content and strategies for teaching, learning and assessment to ensure that the specific requirements of the relevant professional body or apprenticeship standards (or, in Wales, apprenticeship frameworks) are met and maintained. Alignment can be evidenced through the preparation and consideration of detailed mapping documentation.

In practice, engagement with PSRBs may take place concurrently with institutional validation processes. In some cases, elements of programme approval may be informed or led by external professional requirements, rather than occurring in isolation.

Designing a programme of study

Curriculum design is a creative activity, which leads to an iterative process of development. It offers opportunities for providers to encourage innovation, collaboration and a culture of continuous improvement. Programmes are designed to showcase the latest subject developments, research or educational practice. For example, programmes may embrace new technologies or innovative modes of delivery and study, which offer flexibility and are reflective of the needs of the student body.

Academic integrity in programme design

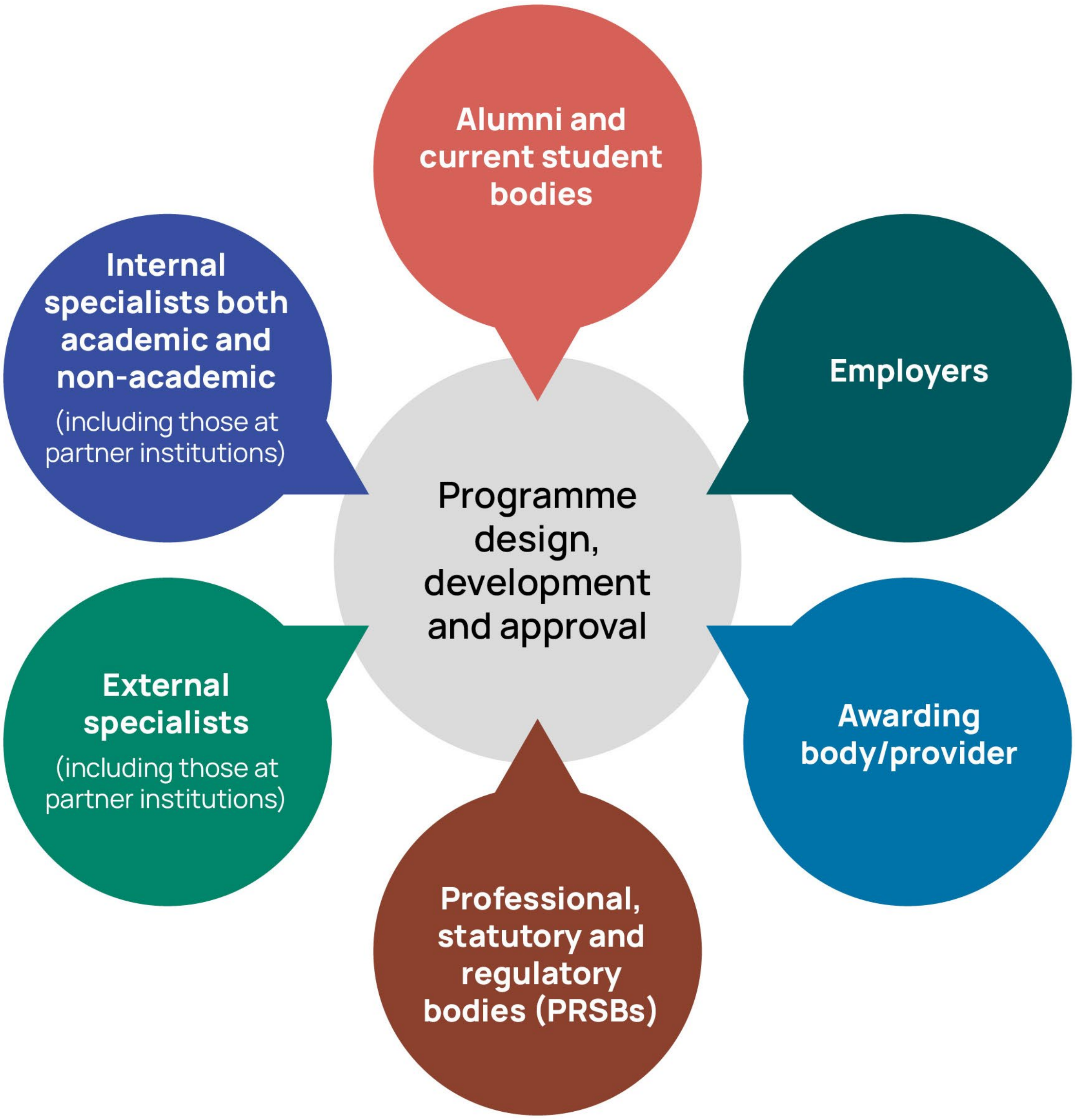
Consideration of academic integrity begins at the point of programme and module design and approval, where assessment strategies and learning outcomes are established. Principle 11 -Teaching, learning and assessment focuses on how academic integrity is fostered, supported and enacted through teaching, learning and assessment practice.

Promotion of academic integrity forms an important element of programme and module design, development and approval. Providers take steps at this stage to ensure that learning outcomes, assessment strategies and marking criteria are designed to support authentic learning, fair judgement and confidence in academic standards. This may include consideration of assessment formats, sequencing and volume, opportunities for formative assessment, and clarity about expectations for independent work. Programme approval processes provide an opportunity to test whether proposed approaches to teaching, learning and assessment promote academic integrity by design, rather than relying solely on post hoc controls or misconduct procedures. While detailed approaches to fostering academic integrity in learning, teaching and assessment are addressed under Principle 11, early consideration during programme design and approval supports coherent institutional approaches and reduces risk to academic standards over time.

Stakeholders

Alongside external reference points and professional and industry standards, academic staff apply their subject and pedagogic expertise (see Principle 11 - Teaching, learning and assessment), draw on insights from comparable programmes offered elsewhere, and incorporate external perspectives, such as subject networks, alumni, employers, practitioners, service users and carers and external subject specialists (see Figure 2 and Key Practice e). They also use evidence from evaluation and enhancement activities such as monitoring, audit and review (see Key Practice e and Principle 5 - Monitoring, evaluating and enhancing provision) and consider the views of both current and prospective students (see Key Practice e and Principle 2 - Engaging students as partners).

Figure 2: Stakeholders who inform programme design



Development of staff, students and other participants

Institutions have initial and continuous development opportunities for staff to support their understanding of effective programme design, development and approval processes. Providers and awarding bodies actively engage students as internal stakeholders in the design, development and approval processes, and provide them with support to make an effective contribution. This could involve providing students with written guidance and/or specific training. Student feedback data and student achievement data may also inform these processes. External stakeholders, for example, Advisory Boards including recent graduates, are provided with clear information and guidance that has clear and accessible language, to support their contribution to effective programme design, development and approval processes.

Cyclical approaches to development and approval

Institutions typically operate a standard cycle for programme development and approval. Providers have their own processes for proposing a new module or programme which typically start with an initial outline proposal (or equivalent). This usually includes consideration of a business case, including any necessary due diligence (if required) and an evaluation of its overall academic merits.

The outline proposal will often be approved by the part of the provider's committee framework which has strategic oversight and responsibility to ensure that the necessary staffing and financial resources exist to support the delivery of the proposed programme. Such committees 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.

Providers determine the design principles and criteria which underpin effective curriculum design within their organisational context, including how the criteria are reflected in the curricula. For example, guidance may be provided on the expected number and format of learning outcomes at each level. This information is usually located within specific internal documents, such as academic regulations, teaching, learning and assessment frameworks (or equivalent), and associated policies. Such internal guidance is not only of benefit to programme design teams, but also quality assurance teams in drafting agendas that support effective programme approval.

Approving a programme of study

All programmes of study which lead to the award of academic credit are validated (approved) by a degree-awarding body. The purpose of programme approval is to ensure that academic standards are set appropriately according to threshold standards as defined in national frameworks, and the student learning opportunities within a proposed programme of study are of high quality. Module approval (where applicable) ensures the appropriateness of subject content and the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment for the award of academic credit. Validation processes are therefore designed to test and independently verify that the proposed programme meets the relevant regulatory requirements, is well-designed, meeting institutional expectations, and the proposed delivery and support arrangements are of high quality. These processes are repeatable and adaptable according to the assessed risk of the proposal under consideration.

Providers may articulate expectations for how often programmes are reviewed holistically to ensure they remain current, distinct and aligned with external requirements, rather than relying on cumulative modification.

The following practical considerations may be useful when designing approval processes:

- The key milestones in the design and approval process, including how timelines are set, how they align with regulatory and consumer protection requirements (such as Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) expectations), and whether curriculum proposals may be peer reviewed and/or approved in stages.
- How students and other relevant stakeholders (for example, employers, service users, community representatives or partners, where appropriate) will be involved at the design and approval stages.
- The points at which training and support is made available to programme teams and how this will be provided.
- How changes during the iterative design process will be managed and agreed.
- The use of subject externality and the involvement of academic partners, PSRBs, and service users (where applicable).
- How the proposed programme-specific learning resources will be verified as appropriate.
- The monitoring and review arrangements for the programme.
- The way in which the curriculum and the proposed delivery and support arrangements will be scrutinised and who will confirm that all relevant standards and other requirements have been met.
- How any conditions of approval will be checked prior to final approval.
- The length of time for which approval is granted.
- How the independence of academic judgement is protected within the approval process, including appropriate separation between programme proposal, scrutiny and final decision making.
- How any differences of opinion will be resolved during the approval process.

Programme approval processes are typically supported by clear information for staff, students and other stakeholders, such as step descriptions, timelines, roles and resources. Providers typically deliver training to all individuals engaged in programme design, approval and modification to enhance the efficiency of the design process and promote consistency in decision making.

When considering a programme that will be delivered in partnership, all participating organisations benefit from a clear understanding of key procedures. Establishing clear communication channels and mutual responsibilities from the outset fosters stronger relationships as well as promoting consistency and compliance (see Principle 8 - Operating partnerships with other organisations).

Partnerships rely upon clear designation of the body responsible for approving a programme and for ensuring that all conditions have been met before the programme begins. The outcomes of course design, development and approval processes is clearly documented (see Key Practice b). Reports on decisions taken, for example highlighting how any conditions and recommendations of approval have been met, are typically considered by a senior academic committee (or equivalent), who are responsible for granting final approval of a programme on behalf of the awarding body (also see Strategic oversight).

Programme modification

Programme and module modification processes enable established curricula to be refreshed or otherwise adjusted between formal review points (if applicable) to enhance the student experience, maintain currency and to ensure continued alignment with updated subject benchmarks and professional and industry standards. Like programme approval, modification processes are adaptable according to the assessed risk of the proposal under consideration. Establishing well-defined criteria for various categories of modification can facilitate the development of effective risk-based procedures and support consensus on suitable oversight responsibilities. For example, the responsibility for the consideration and approval of small, lower risk changes could be delegated to faculties, schools or departments, while the approval of more substantial or higher risk changes receive greater scrutiny and central oversight.

In each case, it would be considered good practice to review proposed modifications to ensure they do not compromise the validated programme aims and learning outcomes or impact material information that may undermine the contract entered into with students at the point of entry (a requirement set by consumer protection law, as described in the CMA guidance for higher education providers).

Reflective questions

1. How have we identified relevant stakeholder groups and engaged them in programme design, development and approval? How has their input influenced decisions or outcomes?
2. In what ways has external academic input, including from external examiners where appropriate, contributed to the design, development or scrutiny of the programme?
3. How have institutional, faculty or departmental aims informed programme design decisions, and where have tensions or trade-offs required the exercise of academic judgement?
4. How have Subject Benchmark Statements informed the programme's intended learning outcomes, structure and level, and how has disciplinary interpretation been applied where appropriate?
5. How has consideration of comparable provision within the sector informed the programme's positioning, distinctiveness and approach to academic standards?
6. How have we achieved and reviewed constructive alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment during programme design and development?
7. How have we considered the student learning journey holistically, including progression, transition points and cumulative assessment demands?
8. How are responsibilities for overseeing and recording curriculum development and enhancement defined, communicated and applied in practice?
9. How are responsibilities for programme design, development, approval and modification defined and managed between the degree-awarding body and any partners?
10. How does our approach to programme design, development, approval and modification support our strategic objectives and portfolio priorities?
11. How have our teaching, learning and assessment strategies been reviewed and refined through programme design and approval, and what improvements have resulted from this process?
12. What opportunities for quality assurance and enhancement are built into programme design, development, approval and modification processes, and how have we used these to inform change over time?

13. How do we capture and evaluate feedback from stakeholder consultation, and how has it shaped programme development or subsequent enhancement activity?
14. How is the alignment between programme design and institutional aims and priorities reviewed over time, and how does this inform our decisions about enhancement, modification or portfolio development?
15. How do we assure ourselves that programmes are designed at the appropriate award level and in line with subject expectations, and how are insights from review or external reference points used to enhance design practice?

Scenario

A department is broadening its academic portfolio to include postgraduate taught provision which is intended to complement existing undergraduate provision and offer additional postgraduate opportunities to its students

Context

Feedback from final year undergraduate students indicated a clear market for postgraduate study; however, graduates often applied to competitor institutions. Although the department offered highly regarded master's by research and doctoral provision, there was an absence of clear taught postgraduate routes aligned to the undergraduate offer. Having received formal approval from the institution, the Head of Department tasked a small team of staff to design a suite of cognate programmes.

The programme team completed a review of existing courses within the locality to determine the market requirements, before consulting the Subject Benchmark Standards and PSRB requirements for postgraduate provision. This enabled the determination of the learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessments within each module, across the level 7/11 programme.

The programme team captured all outcomes from the student focus group discussions, along with comments from external examiners, the PSRB who accredited the undergraduate programme, and employers within the subject sector. Within the university, colleagues within library and learning support, quality department, well-being services and technical services were consulted within the validation process. The proposal was first heard at the Programme Management Board, followed by the Faculty Academic Committee, the institutional Education Committee, and finally approved at Academic Board. The master's level programme was approved and is now offered as a route for students.

Considerations

- Did the programme team consult sufficient teams within the university?
- What external stakeholders could have been consulted? At what stage of development?
- Are there too many committees involved in the approvals process? How could it be streamlined? Is it appropriate to do so?

Key Practice b - Definitive documents

Key Practice b

Definitive documents

A definitive set of documents are produced from the design, development, approval and modification processes, which are held securely and act as the primary source of information about each programme. Similar but proportionate arrangements are in place for modules and smaller units of study.

Programme design, development, approval and modification processes result in definitive programme documents

The degree-awarding body provides its own set of programme documents that support programme design, development, modification and approval processes, typically consistent across the provider, referred to as 'definitive documents'.

The purpose of definitive programme and module documentation is to provide a clear and authoritative account of the approved academic provision. This typically includes programme level information such as aims, intended learning outcomes, structure, title, mode and location of delivery, entry requirements, break-point and intended awards, and any PSRB requirements or accreditation. At module level, definitive documentation sets out approved learning outcomes, content coverage, credit value and level, modes of delivery, assessment methods and requirements, and any conditions for progression or completion. Together, these documents provide the agreed basis on which programmes and modules are designed, delivered, assessed and reviewed, and constitute the approved definition of the provision.

The awarding body 'owns' the definitive documentation, making it accessible for stakeholders and ensuring version control.

Providers define how long definitive programme and module documentation is retained, how versions are controlled, and how documents are archived and accessed following modification, suspension or closure. This supports a clear single source of key information for students, staff and external stakeholders.

Related documentation, such as prospectuses, institutional websites and other marketing information is derived from (and updated in line with any changes to) this definitive documentation and adheres to the legal requirements around provision of information.

Degree-awarding bodies will define the formal approval process for ongoing enhancements to programmes in the definitive documentation. This normally includes the timeframe for approval and implementation of such changes, giving consideration to awarding bodies' obligations to existing students and offer-holders.

Awarding bodies may state the timeframe for the approval of any changes to definitive programme documentation, prior to a programme commencing. Providers and awarding bodies are responsible and accountable for ensuring that the definitive programme documentation remains current, transparent and complies with any external or legal requirements.

Reviewing and enhancing design, development, approval and modification processes

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that programme design, development and approval processes are effective, agile and continue to contribute to the enhancement of the provision offered. In evaluating processes, providers may draw upon a wide range of evidence, including feedback from students, academic staff, professional services, and external stakeholders, as well as sector best practice. Degree-awarding bodies may also consider how these processes support their strategic aims.

Reflective questions

1. How do we define which documents constitute the definitive record for programmes and modules, and how is this communicated to staff, students and external stakeholders?
2. How do our processes ensure that definitive programme and module documentation remains accurate, current and aligned following approval, modification, suspension or closure?
3. What arrangements do we have in place to manage version control, including how superseded versions are archived and how a single, authoritative version ('single source of truth') is maintained?
4. How are responsibilities for producing, approving, updating and quality assuring definitive documentation allocated and understood across academic and professional services teams?
5. How do we ensure that definitive documentation is accessible, clear and useful to students and applicants, including those with different learning needs or studying through different modes of delivery?
6. How are retention periods for definitive programme and module documentation defined, and how do these support regulatory, legal and institutional requirements, including post-award verification?
7. How are changes to definitive documentation communicated to students, staff, collaborative partners and other stakeholders, and how is consistency ensured across related sources such as websites, prospectuses and marketing materials?
8. How do our arrangements support transparency and compliance with consumer protection and information requirements, particularly where changes may affect existing students or offer-holders?
9. What arrangements do we have in place that support students to make an effective contribution to the design, development and approval of a programme?
10. How do we evaluate whether definitive programme and module documentation is meeting the needs of different audiences, particularly students, and what evidence informs improvements?
11. What opportunities exist to improve the accessibility, clarity or environmental sustainability of definitive documentation, for example through digital approaches or reduced duplication?
12. How do we learn lessons from errors, delays or inconsistencies in documentation captured and used to strengthen future programme design, approval and modification processes?

Scenarios

Scenario 1: Conflicting PSRB requirements and institutional policy

Context

Programme developers are seeking professional accreditation from a PSRB. During programme development and approval, differing interpretations emerge regarding the application of the awarding body's academic regulations, in particular those relating to compensation or condonement.

The provider's quality team expects that approved academic regulations and policies apply consistently to all provision unless an exception has been formally approved. However, the programme team believes that the PSRB's requirements, particularly those relating to the demonstration of professional competence, may require limits on the application of compensation or condonement in specific modules or assessments. There is also uncertainty about how the PSRB's expectations around competence interact with institutional approaches to reasonable adjustment and inclusive assessment.

The programme team is unclear whether the PSRB explicitly prohibits compensation or adjustment, or whether this is an inferred interpretation based on professional norms. Guidance issued by the PSRB is high level and does not directly address specific institutional policies, leaving scope for uncertainty and differing practice.

The provider clarifies the PSRB's explicit position and documents the outcomes to provide an audit trail. The tension between the PSRB's competence requirements and institutional policies are considered through established governance processes. This results in a formally agreed, programme-specific variation to regulations. This is recorded clearly in definitive documentation, communicated consistently to stakeholders, and monitored over time to ensure ongoing alignment, fairness and transparency.

The definitive documentation then provides the authoritative reference point for students, staff and external stakeholders, supports consistent implementation of the approved approach, and is reviewed through normal monitoring and review processes to ensure ongoing alignment, fairness and transparency.

Considerations

- How do you establish, evidence and document PSRBs' positions on specific academic policies or practices, rather than relying on assumptions or informal interpretations of professional requirements?
- How are questions of professional competence, assessment thresholds and reasonable adjustment considered together, and how are any agreed interpretations reflected accurately in definitive programme and module documentation?
- Where clarification is required, whose responsibility is it to engage formally with the PSRB, and how is that engagement recorded to provide a clear audit trail for internal and external audiences?
- How are approved outcomes of these discussions communicated consistently to programme teams, quality staff, students and external stakeholders, including how limits or variations to general academic policies are explained and justified?
- How do you monitor the ongoing application of any agreed arrangements to ensure they continue to meet both PSRB expectations and institutional commitments to equity, transparency and academic standards?

Scenario 2: Recording changes to a programme

Context

Changes that were proposed to a programme have been reviewed and approved through the awarding body's regular quality assurance processes. The changes extend to coverage of core modules and new programme-level learning outcomes. The changes need to be reflected in web pages, prospectuses and other marketing materials.

Considerations

- What approaches do you need to take to ensure a complete record of definitive programme documentation is maintained as programmes evolve?
- What processes do you have in place to ensure changes to programmes are reflected in all relevant communications and marketing materials (such as web pages, prospectuses, open days)?
- What timings need to be considered to ensure updates are made before information is published?
- What procedures are in place to support an agile review and approval of changes that are required to a programme, to support the institution's strategic objectives?
- What processes do you have in place to ensure changes to a programme comply with regulatory and legal duties?

Scenario 3: Mainstreaming education for sustainable development

Context

The awarding body has published its new institutional strategy which makes commitments to mainstreaming education for sustainable development across all taught degree programmes. The awarding body expects all programme documentation to reflect such changes at programme and module level.

Considerations

- What processes do you have in place to ensure new strategic initiatives are reflected in definitive programme documentation?
- How do you ensure that adequate timeframes are set to support stakeholder engagement?
- How do you maintain programme cohesion and distinctiveness while implementing institution-wide initiatives?
- What mechanisms are in place for effective and agile approval processes in the context of wide-scale changes to education provision across the institution?
- What consideration should be given to institution-wide changes that might impact one programme more significantly than another?

Key Practice c - Recording and certifying awards and outcomes

Key Practice c

Recording and certifying awards and outcomes

The award to be received and how outcomes of study are recorded and certificated are made clear to all students and staff involved in the teaching, learning and evaluation of the programme and module.

Providers ensure that the award to be received, and how outcomes of study are recorded and certificated, are clear, accurate and consistently communicated to students, staff and relevant stakeholders. This includes transparency around award titles, credit volume and level, intended learning outcomes, modes of delivery, assessment approaches, and any conditions or requirements that apply to progression, completion or break-point awards. The level of qualifications awarded are comparable to those offered across the UK and, where applicable, The Framework of Qualifications for The European Higher Education Area.

Producing information

In practice, degree-awarding bodies provide definitive programme and module documentation (see Key Practice b) detailing aims and learning outcomes, which align to the relevant characteristic statements and framework of qualifications. The award to be received and programme of learning is readily available to applicants/learners prior to and during their period of study. 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 (for example, CMA guidance). Providers are also responsible for ensuring all elements of an award are communicated and documented, such as accreditations, dual awards and sandwich years.

Information for students and graduates

Students have timely and appropriate access to information relating to assessment outcomes, progression decisions and records of achievement at module and programme level. Retention of data policies are available and implemented within providers, in line with legal duties.

For most courses, graduates are provided with a certificate and transcript, showing final award outcomes and details of modules and associated learning, such as academic education partnerships, dual awards or placement years where applicable. For short courses/micro-credentials, these award certifications may differ.

Information about awards and outcomes supports student decision making across diverse study pathways. This includes clarity about break-point awards, transfer arrangements, credit accumulation and recognition of prior learning, particularly where programmes contribute to flexible or modular study routes, including lifelong learning entitlement (LLE) where applicable.

Course outcomes

Course outcomes awards and graduate attributes are clearly communicated to all current and prospective students, staff and associated organisations. Course outcomes are tailored to disciplines through the development process (see Principle 11 - Teaching, learning and assessment). Staff and students across a provider need to understand how these outcomes are identified, assessed and reviewed to enable students to achieve their desired and required learning outcomes.

Implementation

When implementing this Key Practice, providers take into account several key considerations. Student and record management systems support the accurate, secure and consistent application of assessment regulations, ensuring that progression decisions, classifications and award outcomes are determined reliably and in accordance with approved academic regulations.

This is particularly important where awards are likely to be made to students across different academic disciplines, locations or with partners, and where decentralised decision making may increase the risk of inconsistency. Providers have oversight mechanisms that enable them to identify and address variation in assessment and awarding practices, maintain clear audit trails, and demonstrate that equivalent academic standards are being applied wherever students study.

Security and data governance arrangements ensure that student achievement records are protected throughout the student life cycle, while enabling appropriate access by staff, students and graduates. Providers consider how award information, transcripts and achievement records remain available after graduation to support lifelong learning, professional recognition and employability. Information is accessible and available in formats that meet digital accessibility requirements and support the needs of diverse learners and graduates.

Providers may also wish to consider ways to grade and record student achievement beyond the traditional degree classification system commonly in use in the UK, while maintaining the public's understanding and the confidence of employers. This may include recording broader evidence of achievement, professional competencies, work-based learning, micro-credentials, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, or other forms of personal and professional development.

Reviewing policy and process

Providers set their own timeframe for the review of policy, process and guidance which could be annually or over a longer period. Internal processes are clear about where responsibility lies for reviewing policy and process.

The guidance provides clarity for staff, students and external stakeholders such as external examiners and collaborative partners, while also addressing curriculum management processes and recognising variations in institutional systems. It is important to consider the different national contexts across the UK and their distinct requirements, as well as the unique needs of various provider types, including large universities, colleges, small specialist institutions, and collaborative partnerships. Additional considerations are made for areas such as research degrees, dual awards and other provision that may require tailored approaches or enhanced coordination across institutions and regulatory environments.

Partnerships

Where programmes are delivered in partnership, providers ensure that responsibilities for recording, confirming and certifying awards and outcomes are clearly defined, and that a single, authoritative set of records is maintained by the degree awarding body. See Principle 8 - Operating partnerships with other organisations for more information.

Reflective questions

1. How is information about awards, credit, learning outcomes and progression requirements communicated clearly and consistently to students at different stages of the student life cycle (pre-application, during study and after completion)?
2. How do we evaluate whether students understand how their outcomes are recorded and certificated, and what evidence informs any improvements to information or processes?
3. How do we assure ourselves that student achievement, progression and award outcomes are recorded, classified and awarded consistently across different disciplines, academic units, campuses and delivery partners, and what evidence do we use to identify and address variation in practice?
4. In what ways do our programmes regularly evaluate and improve the effectiveness of processes for recording, certifying and communicating study outcomes and awards, ensuring that both students and staff are confident in the accuracy and transparency of these processes?
5. How are break-point awards, transfer routes and credit recognition recorded and explained, and how do these arrangements support flexible patterns of study where applicable?
6. What enhancements could strengthen transparency around flexible study routes, break-point awards or recognition of prior learning?
7. How are responsibilities for recording and certifying awards managed in partnership arrangements, and how is a single authoritative record assured?
8. How do we ensure that award titles, transcripts and certificates reflect the approved programme, including any accreditations, dual awards, placement years or integrated work-based learning?
9. How do our data retention and access arrangements support graduates' needs for verification while meeting legal and regulatory requirements?
10. How do lessons from appeals, complaints or verification queries inform improvements to recording and certification practice?
11. How do we ensure that important policy changes, regulatory updates and procedural guidance are communicated consistently across all teams and departments?
12. How do we assure ourselves that institutional policies are implemented consistently across all organisational units, programmes or services?

Scenario

Requests for certificates from former students

Context

A provider has been contacted by a former student who completed their studies several years ago and is requesting formal verification of their award and, if possible, a replacement certificate. There have been a number of institutional restructures since they completed their studies and the course and school in which they studied no longer exist.

The former student indicates that the verification is required for employment purposes and that they are unsure how their award outcomes were recorded at the point of completion.

Considerations

- How do you ensure the accuracy, integrity and accessibility of historical student records, particularly where organisational structures, programme titles or delivery arrangements have changed over time?
- What processes are in place to verify and re-issue award documentation, including certificates and transcripts, and how are responsibilities for doing so clearly allocated?
- How are records of awards, credit and outcomes maintained to support verification requests, including where students completed via alternative routes such as break-point awards, transfer or modular study?
- How do you confirm and document any additional features of an award, such as accreditations, dual awards, placement years or partnerships, when responding to verification requests?
- How are identity verification, confidentiality and data protection requirements applied when responding to requests from former students?
- How do charges, timeframes and communications relating to replacement certificates or verification letters ensure transparency and fairness?

Key Practice d - Publishing policies and processes

Key Practice d

Publishing policies and processes

Policies and processes that support the design, development, approval and modification of programmes and modules are published on each provider's website and are easily accessible to key stakeholders.

Policies and processes for programme and module design, approval and modification provide the foundations for high-quality and relevant provision that meets the needs of the student and other stakeholders.

Strategic oversight and institutional framework

Providers ensure they have strategic oversight of these processes. Programme and module design are aligned with institutional strategies and informed by the institutional context. To do this, the processes are set out in policies that are approved and reviewed by the appropriate governance bodies. These bodies will also be responsible for ensuring that the policies are followed through appropriate monitoring.

Supporting those involved in programme design and approval

It is vital that providers support all those involved, whether they are professional services or academic staff, students or external stakeholders. 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. Stakeholders must receive information about the processes and their contribution to those, in the form of written guidance, supplemented by training and development opportunities. That support is reviewed and revised on an ongoing basis to ensure that it meets the needs of all involved.

Information requirements across the programme life cycle

Published information covers the full cycle of programme and module development: from initial proposal (including both business and academic considerations), through formal approval to modification and closure/suspension (as required). Distinct process steps are in place for programmes and modules, reflecting the level of lower or higher stakes. Processes are flexible and proportionate to the scale of the proposal to avoid placing an undue burden on the provider and staff. There is consistent decision making between different institutional units, such as faculties, while allowing for subject-related variation as appropriate.

Information takes various forms and recognises that different groups have different needs. Academic staff require clear timelines and responsibilities, professional service staff need to understand and be able to support processes and approvals, students need to know how changes may affect their study, while external and collaborative partners need assurance of agreed standards. Governing bodies need to be assured that new or amended programmes or modules continuously comply with external regulation or supervisory requirements. Providers can accommodate these different needs by producing layered information with summary overviews alongside more detailed policy documents.

Formats, guidance and curriculum management systems

Information will range from formal policies to such informal texts as flowcharts, FAQs, responsibility tables, and timelines. Where providers use a curriculum or curriculum management system, this information may be brought together within a structured digital environment that supports version control, workflow and access at different stages of the programme life cycle. They are written in language that will be easily comprehensible to all involved, making use of glossaries and other forms of explication as necessary and avoiding acronyms and jargon.

Increasingly, providers use digital curriculum or curriculum management systems to support the design, approval, modification and publication of programme and module information. These systems may integrate workflows, templates, approval routes and version control, providing a structured environment for managing curriculum information across its life cycle. Where such systems are used, providers ensure that they are configured in ways that align with institutional policies and processes, are accessible to relevant stakeholders, and do not obscure key decision points or responsibilities. Digital systems can support transparency, consistency and auditability: to do this, information held within them will need to be clear, comprehensible and capable of being communicated effectively to staff, students and external stakeholders, including through other formats where appropriate.

However information is presented, it is important that it accurately reflects how things work in practice, rather than presenting procedures in overly complex or abstract terms. Mapping the published process to actual workflows will help to maintain consistency and reduce confusion.

Graduate attributes and programme outcomes

A shared understanding of course outcomes and graduate attributes is central to effective programme design and underpins decisions about learning, teaching and assessment.

Graduate attributes are clear and specific, and communicated to students, staff and the public. The communication of attributes enables students to understand how they can achieve and articulate them in a wider context. The attainment of specified attributes is not dependent on the location, mode or level of study, or the presence or absence of any specific student characteristic.

Access, transparency and version control

Consideration is given to what information is internal and staff facing and what is appropriate for external audiences, as this will determine whether it is made available via an institution's intranet or public website. Providers may use clear, well signposted web pages that offer high level overviews alongside access to more detailed guidance, helping users to locate relevant information efficiently.

Some providers choose to publish detailed information about quality processes, including guidance on communicating programme changes to students or collaborative partners. While this can enhance transparency, it requires a commitment to keeping information up to date. Policies are therefore made accessible through relevant web pages and supported by processes for version control, including clear date stamping, to ensure a single authoritative source of current information.

Governance, assurance and audit trail

Providers review their programme and module design and development processes to ensure that they retain currency and reflect developments in the internal and external landscape. This takes place through the existing governance system, with the relevant committees discussing and approving amendments. Internal processes are clear about where responsibility lies for reviewing policy and process.

Committee discussions are informed by the relevant contextual considerations, with staff in attendance who can speak to these, and be properly recorded. A clear audit trail of paperwork must be maintained and version control carefully documented. The committee confirms that the outcomes are relayed to the stakeholders, and by whom.

Providers set their timeframe for the review of policy and processes, deciding whether this is annual or over a longer period. This decision will be shaped by a recognition of the changes occurring in the regulatory and sector landscape.

Reflective practice and continuous enhancement

Revisions to processes are shaped by reflective practice and consultation among stakeholders. For example, the students' representative body may be consulted about how to develop and enhance opportunities for informed student engagement. Professional services and academic staff are consulted throughout and at the end of the processes to assess their understanding and engagement and to provide suggestions for enhancement.

Reflective practice can be supported through the systematic tracking and analysis of data, providing insight into good practice and opportunities for improvement. This may include monitoring progress against key academic milestones and reviewing patterns arising from programme modification, such as changes to assessment strategies or learning outcomes. Providers record the outcomes of this reflection through established processes, such as annual programme reports, ensuring that reflection, learning and resulting actions are clearly evidenced and can inform ongoing enhancement.

Student survey data, particularly feedback on curriculum and assessment design, including free-text responses, can be used to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of initial programme design and subsequent changes. This evidence may inform reflection on how institutional policies are operating in practice, including those that distinguish between different categories of programme and module amendment (for example, major and minor changes) and the application of awarding requirements. Reflection may also consider the distinction between material and non-material changes, particularly in relation to consumer protection expectations. Insights gained through this evaluation can inform future refinements to processes and policies, supporting consistency, transparency and continuous enhancement.

Reflective questions

1. How do we support staff to access and use relevant policies, procedures and guidance at different stages of programme and module design, development, approval and modification?
2. How do we know that staff understand where to seek advice or clarification during these processes, and how effective are these support routes in practice?
3. How are different stakeholder groups engaged in programme design, development and approval, and how does this engagement influence decision making and final outcomes?
4. How does monitoring of programme design, development and approval activity (including timescales, volume and types of proposals) inform our strategic approaches to portfolio management and development?
5. How are responsibilities for different aspects and stages of course design and development articulated, communicated and understood across our institution (and, where relevant, any partners)?
6. In what ways do our approaches to programme and module design, development and approval reflect and actively support our strategic objectives and priorities?
7. How are our design, development and approval processes structured so that they can be applied proportionately and flexibly to different types of proposal (for example, new provision, modifications, partnerships or innovative delivery models)?
8. How do the design, development, approval and modification processes assure us that programmes comply with our broader policy framework?
9. How do we clearly articulate the intended enhancement to the student experience when programme modifications are approved, and how is their impact subsequently evaluated and evidenced from the student perspective?
10. How is feedback from programme approval panels and stakeholders systematically analysed, shared and used to inform improvements to institutional practice, policy and guidance?
11. How do we actively engage with evolving sector discussions and external reference points, and how are decisions to align with, adapt or diverge from sector practice evaluated and reviewed over time?
12. How are opportunities for stakeholder feedback designed so that input is timely, meaningful and demonstrably influences programme design, development and approval decisions?

Scenarios

Scenario 1: Limits on the number of programme changes

Context

A provider has a process for academic colleagues to make changes to programmes and modules. The process automatically includes steps of consideration and approval of the change requests but does not have limits on the number of changes that can be made.

During a review of curriculum modification activity, the Quality Assurance (QA) team notices that academic colleagues are using the modification process inconsistently. Some staff follow the published guidance and approval routes, while others rely on local practices, outdated guidance documents or advice from colleagues. Staff report difficulty identifying which guidance is current, and some are unclear about when a series of module changes should trigger a wider programme review.

While each change goes through a clearly defined approval process, there are no checks on the cumulative effect or frequency of these changes. Over time, the course structure and content have evolved significantly from what was originally approved, prompting the QA team to wonder whether the course still reflects what was originally approved at the point of validation. The team recognises that if this 'change creep' continues unchecked, the course might no longer comply with PSRB requirements or other external requirements.

The team recognises that although the policies and processes are published, simply making them available does not guarantee that they are easy to find, understood consistently or used effectively. They therefore consider practical steps such as reviewing how guidance is presented on the website, improving signposting and communications, creating a single source of truth for modification procedures, and introducing mechanisms to monitor how published guidance is being used across the institution.

To address the risk of change creep, the QA staff consider practical steps such as implementing periodic reviews of cumulative changes to programmes, setting clearer thresholds for when module-level changes should trigger a broader programme review, and providing guidance to course teams about the importance of monitoring the overall coherence and intended learning outcomes of their courses. These steps aim to ensure that programme and module modification processes are transparent, accessible and consistently applied by all stakeholders, while maintaining the integrity of approved programmes.

Considerations

- How would you assure yourself that policies and processes for programme and module changes are easy to find, understand and use for all relevant stakeholders?
- What would you do to ensure that repeated minor changes do not result in a course that is misaligned with its original approval?
- What indicators could you use to flag when cumulative changes need extra scrutiny or a formal re-approval?
- How can you collaborate with other colleagues to work together to track, communicate and manage the overall impact of programme and module changes?
- What evidence could you gather to determine whether staff and other stakeholders are following the published processes consistently?
- How could you ensure that there is a single, authoritative source of information about programme and module modifications?
- What arrangements could be put in place to communicate updates to policies and processes and ensure all stakeholders are working from current guidance?
- How can academic and professional service colleagues work together to ensure that published guidance supports consistent decision making and effective oversight of cumulative programme changes?

Scenario 2: Unclear regulations on progression and reassessment

Context

A second year undergraduate student selects their modules for the following academic year based on information provided during option choice activities and general programme guidance. Partway through the year, the student realises they have misunderstood a key programme regulation relating to progression and reassessment, which affects their ability to continue on their intended pathway.

When the student queries the decision, they are directed to the formal academic regulations. These confirm that the decision was technically correct; however, the regulations are located deep within the provider's website, written primarily for staff audiences, and use dense, technical language. The student states that they were unaware of the regulation and had not been signposted to it in a clear or accessible way. They also note that more user friendly summaries were either unavailable or out of date.

The situation results in student dissatisfaction, multiple queries to professional services teams, and the need for the provider to explain its decision making in the context of transparency and consumer protection obligations.

Considerations

- How accessible, visible and student-friendly are programme regulations and related guidance at key decision points (such as module choice and progression)?
- How do you assure yourselves that students understand the implications of regulations that materially affect their academic choices?
- Where regulations are complex, what steps do you take to provide clear summaries or explanations? Would simplification of the regulations be a better approach?
- How do you evaluate whether published information genuinely supports informed student decision making?
- How are recurring areas of student misunderstanding identified and used to inform enhancements to guidance, communication and processes?

Key Practice e - External engagement and evaluation

Key Practice e

External engagement and evaluation

External engagement and evaluation form a component part of the design, development, approval and modification process

Effective programme development and evaluation require engagement with experts external to the teaching team but there is no single approach that will benefit all programmes at all institutions. Diversity of academic choices is an essential aspect of UK higher education, where a wide range of programmes can cater to diverse student communities and broader societal needs. Ultimately, it is up to providers and programme teams to decide which experts they engage with, how they engage with them, and how that engagement influences curriculum design and the processes that surround it.

Effective programme design is based on a detailed understanding of what is **relevant**, **valuable, meaningful** and **valid** for the aspirational futures of students who have chosen to study that degree at that institution.

- **Relevant:** Aligned to the aspirations, motivations and prior experiences of the student body, recognising diversity within cohorts and changing learner needs.
- **Valuable:** Designed to help students flourish in their personal and professional futures, as evidenced through graduate outcomes, progression and external perspectives on impact.
- **Meaningful:** Key stakeholders (including educators, students, society and potential employers) understand the programme outcomes and how they could be applied in authentic contexts after graduation.
- **Valid:** Underpinned by engagement with relevant sector reference points, qualification frameworks, subject benchmarks and occupational or professional standards (where applicable).

Achieving this requires engagement with multiple stakeholders outside the teaching team. These include colleagues within the provider as well as external stakeholders, and the nature and extent of their involvement will vary depending on the activity being undertaken. For instance, the design of new programmes will typically draw on external perspectives, while development, approval and modification processes may also require external engagement where the scale, significance or potential impact of proposed changes warrants it. Some examples of these stakeholders and how their expertise, experiences and expectations can support the development and evaluation of 'good' programmes of study are provided below.

Examples of external stakeholders

Future, current and former students (alumni): Understanding how students' prior experiences have shaped their confidence, competence and educational literacy can help you scaffold the curriculum; especially at the times where students are most sensitive to retention issues. For example, students come to higher education with different qualifications, which can influence their prior knowledge of the subject, or the impact of social capital in navigating the unwritten, unofficial and often unintended lessons, values and perspectives within a learning environment (the hidden curriculum). Engagement with alumni further strengthens this understanding by providing longitudinal insight into how programme design and learning opportunities translate into graduate outcomes, professional practice and lifelong learning. Student satisfaction and programme efficacy can therefore be improved through a detailed understanding of what students hope to achieve by investing their time, effort and money in a degree, alongside alumni perspectives on the value and real-world applicability of their education.

Professional services staff within the university: Professional services have deep expertise on increasingly essential aspects of curriculum design, such as career literacy, inclusive education, student well-being, digital literacy, and building communities of practice. Institution-level professional services can provide advice and guidance - effective programmes embed student-service interaction into the curriculum (which is easier during development and evaluation as opposed to during delivery). This extends to the programme development process itself, where best practice involves continuous collaboration with institutional quality teams, as opposed to the traditional back-and-forth approach.

Discipline-related career professionals and external organisations: This engagement is essential to bridging any gaps between your programme team's expertise and the aspirational futures of your students. External engagement can also calibrate the academic standards of the course and ensure they meet the expectations of the community who work with your graduates.

Commonly used approaches can include:

- PSRBs and accrediting bodies, which can collate the perspectives and values of multiple relevant stakeholders (such as international professionals) as well as inform effective pedagogic approaches
- industry boards, which can provide greater focus on regional needs or specialist future pathways. They allow for regular and focused problem-solving and course evaluation
- alumni engagement, which can help programme teams understand what aspects of the course were most effective and what problems need to be addressed. Alumni also provide information on the aspirational futures available to future graduates
- service users, such as patient groups or end-users of professional practice, whose lived experience perspectives can ensure curricula remain responsible to real-world needs, particularly in professionally oriented disciplines
- industry reports, which can provide essential horizon scanning for sector challenges, skills gaps and career paths. For example, see the Life Sciences 2035: Developing the Skills for Future Growth report
- formal partnerships with external organisations, which can provide important curriculum development opportunities. For example, apprenticeship or placement models can be used to embed external expertise and experiences into the curriculum directly. Smaller-scale and opportunistic partnerships can be used to craft challenge-based learning opportunities that allow more immediate connection with student futures.

External examiners: Providers continue to engage external examiners to provide an independent perspective on academic standards and comparability across the sector. Their role as set out in the QAA External Examining Principles, briefly, is to act as disciplinary experts who provide impartial scrutiny of assessment standards and programme coherence. In the context of programme design, development and modification, external examiners act as critical friends. This can include advising on aspects such as whether assessment design is balanced and fair; the coherence and integrity of the programme structure; and whether proposed changes maintain appropriate academic standards.

Scholarly literature

There is a rich body of evidence to support the design and evaluation of inclusive and effective programmes of study, making external pedagogic expertise easily accessible. Many common challenges, such as effective group work, fair grading and impactful feedback cycles, are best addressed by embedding best practice into the curriculum, with evidence-based guidance readily available. Literature also provides guidance of effective evaluation processes at programme and institution levels; for example, warnings of bias in the use of generic student evaluation of teaching surveys (SETs). Effective programme design, development, approval and evaluation is built on sound pedagogic principles and supported by evidence that they will be effective for that programme at that institution.

Induction and supporting materials

Providers offer induction and supporting materials to ensure that externals understand how these processes operate and what is expected of them. This includes offering clear guidance on curriculum proposals, the institutional context, specific frameworks or principles for learning, teaching and assessment, and clarification of the specific role externals play in the process.

Time and remuneration or recognition

Sufficient time and remuneration or recognition are allocated to sustain meaningful external engagement, proportionate to the activity. Whether reviewing draft proposals, attending meetings, or advising on curriculum design, externals are given adequate time to prepare and respond. Remuneration or recognition may take a range of forms, including financial payment, professional development opportunities or other agreed means of valuing contribution, reflecting the scope and complexity of their involvement, formal acknowledging their expertise and supporting sustained collaboration.

Gathering and using feedback

Feedback may be gathered from external voices in various ways, such as directly via focus groups or indirectly through survey responses or written comments on proposals. This feedback is gathered in a timely manner, analysed and incorporated in the documentation prepared for the relevant process. Providers ensure that feedback mechanisms are accessible and that insights are captured early enough to influence programme development rather than simply endorse it.

Responding to feedback

Externals receive a response to their feedback, which forms part of the documentation trail and details how the points they have raised have been addressed or incorporated into programme proposals. This response demonstrates how external input has shaped the final design. Where feedback prompts significant changes, externals may be invited to comment on revised drafts, reinforcing their role in continuous improvement.

Reflective questions

1. Which external stakeholders (employers, PSRBs, alumni, academic peers, community partners) are involved at each stage of design, approval and modification?
2. How do we obtain an appropriate balance of perspectives, including external, appropriate to the scale of the activity, and is this stakeholder mix different for new courses or periodic reviews?
3. How can we ensure that feedback mechanisms are inclusive, avoiding an over-reliance on a small group of highly engaged individuals?
4. What safeguards and protocols are in place to identify and manage potential conflicts of interest among external contributors?
5. How can we ensure that the timelines for stakeholder input align with internal development and approval deadlines without over-burdening staff or externals?
6. How clear and accessible are our briefing materials and processes in preparing externals to engage meaningfully with design, development, approval and modification processes?
7. How is external feedback systematically captured, used and fed back to contributors, and how transparent is the documentation showing how our decisions were informed by that input?
8. How is the purpose of engaging external stakeholders articulated at different stages of design, development, approval and modification, and how does this shape who is involved, and how?
9. To what extent is external engagement designed to challenge assumptions and prompt innovation, rather than confirm existing approaches?

Scenario

A provider co-designs a healthcare apprenticeship with an NHS trust

Context

A provider is developing a new Level 6 Enhanced Clinical Practitioner apprenticeship in partnership with a regional NHS trust. To ensure the programme is fit for purpose, aligned with the apprenticeship standard and aligned with workforce priorities, the provider establishes an Employer Advisory Panel.

This Panel includes:

- advanced clinical practitioners and service leads from the NHS trust
- workforce development and apprenticeship leads
- a representative from NHS England
- external academic advisers with expertise in clinical education and apprenticeship design (this may include members of the trailblazer group)

The programme aims to support experienced healthcare professionals stepping into more advanced roles, so the design has to reflect both academic rigour and the realities of clinical practice. Delivery arrangements are a particular focus of the Panel's discussions, with the trust's representatives highlighting the challenges of releasing staff for study while maintaining safe staffing levels. A block release teaching model is agreed, with structured workplace learning supported by clinical mentors.

Considerations

- Does the role of the Employer Advisory Panel continue beyond commencement of the programme, and, if so, in what capacity?
- How will the provider maintain meaningful engagement with external stakeholders beyond the initial programme design?
- What processes or structures ensure employer feedback informs delivery and learner support throughout the apprenticeship?
- How might alternative delivery models unfamiliar to providers be successfully adopted? For instance, how is learning sequenced and time for consolidation and reflection allowed within models such as block release?
- How do you feed the impact of their contributions back to advisory panels such as this?

Key Practice f - Aligning design, development and approval with EDI and environmental sustainability

Key Practice f

Aligning design, development and approval with EDI and environmental sustainability

The design, development, approval and modification processes align with providers' policies and practices on equity, equality, diversity and inclusion, and environmental sustainability

Equality, equity, diversity and inclusion

Providers must consider from the outset their legal obligations under equality laws in their jurisdiction when designing, developing and approving curriculum, to prevent the discrimination of both students and staff. This includes the conformity of their wider internal policies and processes which are likely to interact with the curriculum development cycle (for example, a provider's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy and assessment regulations).

Providers are encouraged to adopt a universal approach to inclusion. This means moving away from a culture of individual reasonable adjustments based on declared disabilities, towards inclusive practices that benefit all students. Provision of reasonable adjustments is anticipatory under UK law, meaning 'providers should have thought about what adjustments they ought to make to matters affecting all students, prior to becoming aware of a specific student's disability' (from the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Abrahart guidance). Provision of reasonable adjustments is the responsibility of all student-facing staff, not just specialist disability services. As such, this needs to be considered at programme design and validation stage, not just through daily interactions with students.

Providers give guidance to course developers on how to use EDI related data during curriculum design, development and modification to ensure that decision making is informed, evidence based and anticipatory in its approach to supporting equity, equality, diversity and inclusion. This includes having due regard to relevant equality legislation and the needs of students across a range of protected characteristics and lived experiences, rather than responding only to individual disclosures or issues as they arise.

For example, a provider may consider disability when selecting assessment methods and adopt inclusive, anticipatory approaches that benefit all students, reducing reliance on individual reasonable adjustments. More broadly, providers and course teams draw on demographic, attainment and engagement data relating to characteristics such as race and ethnicity, sex and gender, age, religion or belief, sexual orientation, caring responsibilities and socio-economic background, as well as prior educational experience.

Awareness of cohort diversity may include anticipating variation in entry qualifications (for example, A levels, BTECs or international qualifications), the proportion of international or first generation students, and differing cultural or linguistic expectations, and reflecting these considerations holistically in course design, delivery and assessment.

Providers continually review and evaluate their courses and curriculum frameworks both in terms of cohort outcomes and equity of those outcomes across demographic groups. This will include monitoring of programme key performance indicators across the student life cycle, such as access, success and experience. Course designers and modifiers seek to close gaps in these key performance indicators across student demographics where they exist. Closure of outcome gaps is integral to programme design, particularly through inclusive assessment strategy.

Providers may have guidance for course developers on how to manage PSRBs and competence standards in relation to EDI, either local or institution-wide. If it does not exist, it may be needed. An approach where providers engage with PSRBs to resolve issues they may not be aware of, rather than following accreditation requirements automatically, should be taken, especially where legal duties fall directly on the assessing institution.

Course designers are mindful that many students do not declare disabilities to their institution. The EHRC Advice note for the higher education sector from the legal case of University of Bristol vs Abrahart states that 'an education provider did not need to have formal knowledge of a disability and its effects for there to be a duty to make reasonable adjustments' - another reason to consider a universal approach, rather then individual reasonable adjustments (from the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Advice note for the higher education sector from the legal case of University of Bristol vs Abrahart).

This Key Practice assumes that providers have policies and practices relating to equity, equality, diversity and inclusion, and environmental sustainability. What is not assumed is that these policies are, in themselves, sufficient or static. These areas may evolve in response to students' experiences, new legislation, societal change and sector wide discussion. Aligning course design, development and approval processes therefore presents an opportunity not only to review and improve institutional policies, but also to consider how EDI principles are reflected in curriculum content, pedagogical approaches and modes of assessment. This includes ensuring that programmes support students to engage critically with diverse perspectives, contested ideas and real world issues within an environment that values academic freedom, freedom of expression and open, respectful dialogue.

Sustainability

Providers are encouraged to embed sustainability and sustainable development as a graduate attribute within curriculum frameworks and the content of programmes, and can consult the Education for Sustainable Development sections in the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements. Further help can be found in QAA and Advance HE's Education for Sustainable Development guidance.

Sustainability is ideally integrated throughout the curriculum of a programme, not just as an optional non-assessed component, to ensure appropriate consideration for the social, economic, ethical and environmental pillars of sustainability in subject-discipline contexts. Providers may consider this an opportunity to embed outputs and opportunities generated through broader institutional priorities such as research and knowledge exchange, employability and civic engagement within curriculum design from a sustainable development perspective.

A provider's process has due regard and consideration for environmental sustainability. Depending on subject discipline and provider context this could vary in practice; however, it would likely include physical and digital aspects of a provider's estates and digital strategies, such as usage and management of facilities, resource, consumables and wastes, specifically in relation to teaching, learning and assessment.

Reflective questions

1. How does our curriculum development process engage with Subject Benchmark Statements to inform discipline-specific approaches to equity, equality, diversity, inclusion and sustainability, and how is the effectiveness of this engagement evaluated?
2. How are diverse student perspectives involved in our curriculum development and review, and how do we assure ourselves that this engagement is meaningful, representative and influential?
3. How does our curriculum development take account of the differing backgrounds, experiences and aspirations of students when preparing them for a diverse range of career pathways?
4. What guidance and support do we provide to staff involved in curriculum development to support EDI-informed decision making, including understanding relevant legal and regulatory responsibilities?
5. How are relevant internal and external stakeholders, including specialist disability and inclusion services, involved in curriculum development and approval, and how does their input shape EDI-related decisions?
6. In a UK context, how are issues such as competency standards considered and reviewed in light of inclusion?
7. How does engagement with PSRBs inform curriculum development, approval and review, including the interpretation and incorporation of EDI, sustainability and accreditation requirements, and how is learning from that engagement embedded and shared across provision?
8. How do we ensure that all students are able to participate fully in all aspects of their programmes, including specialist teaching such as laboratories, placements and international field trips, and that curricula and learning environments support inclusive engagement with complex, sensitive or contested topics?
9. How are programmes designed to support equitable student outcomes across demographic groups, including continuation, attainment, degree completion, degree classification, and progression to postgraduate study and/or employment, and how are teaching, learning and assessment strategies designed to support these outcomes?

10. How does the programme ensure that diverse voices, perspectives, examples and case studies are embedded throughout, rather than presented only as optional or peripheral content?
11. How does the programme support the development of assessment literacy for all students, and how does it evaluate whether students understand assessment requirements, expectations and standards well enough to demonstrate their achievement effectively?
12. How does the programme identify and develop opportunities to embed sustainability within curriculum content, informed by Subject Benchmark Statements, disciplinary research and professional practice, and how are students supported to explore, apply and critically reflect on these themes in ways relevant to the subject area?

Scenario 1: Developing an inclusive approach to PSRB competence standards

Context

A university reviews its teaching and learning strategy to maximise the student experience. A BSc forensic science programme was undergoing the five-year reaccreditation process by its PSRB, having undertaken a significant transformation in its approach to educational delivery by implementing an intensive block curriculum model (four subject block modules), to enhance the student learning experience. The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Forensic Science asks all forensic science programmes to ensure that there is a consideration of sustainability and accessibility with a consideration for reasonable adjustments. This aligns to the component standard requirements within the accreditation educational standards where inclusivity guidelines include provision of alternative learning opportunities where necessary.

The wider institution initiated an academic tutoring policy to ensure consistency with student support, and pastoral guidance, and this is an integral inclusion for every subject area. Forensic science is an applied discipline where the subject themes may be triggers for students with lived experiences; therefore, this requires trauma-informed pedagogy strategies and a compassionate pedagogic ethos. Furthermore, establishing safe and supported learning spaces (online and campus) is essential. The forensic science programme team proposed to underpin the four subject block modules with a year-long zero credit module linked to academic tutoring and assessed via an e-portfolio within the virtual learning environment.

A consultation process involved students, alumni, academic staff, professional service colleagues (laboratory technicians, library and learning services, careers and employability, student support and well-being team) external examiners and employers. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive for the e-portfolio module where all students (supported by their academic tutor) are supported to undertake self-reflection, target setting, career development activity and exploration of global issues, including sustainability, while recording their practical competency skills from laboratory classes (essential accreditation criteria).

The accreditation review team commended the entire programme team for the novel approach to academic tutoring linked to PSRB requirements, and the reaccreditation was successful.

Considerations

- How can this model be incorporated within other programmes and disseminated more widely?
- How are PSRBs engaged to alert them to issues with their requirements?

Scenario 2: Closing a degree classification awarding gap through programme design

Context

A programme team identifies a significant awarding gap between two populations of students: 77% of white undergraduates obtain a 1st or 2.1, but only 57% of Asian students do so: a 20-percentage point gap. They wish to close this gap through programme-level change.

The programme team explores relevant data in detail, at programme level, calling on the support of the provider's specialist data team. The programme team reviews the programme-level assessment strategy, to identify and remove any potential sources of inequity through inclusive assessment design. The team also looks at the programme-level learning outcomes and competencies, as well as their assessments. Finally, it reviews the assessment strategy, and how assessment builds through the programme, to see whether the first year adequately prepares students for the second year, and then the third year.

A number of recommendations are given, which are disseminated across the institution.

- Increase the opportunities for students to personalise their assessments, through choice of topic relevant to their interests, or choice of assessment format to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in a medium that plays to their strengths (for example, students could be given the choice of a written report or presentation).
- Build student assessment and feedback literacy throughout the programme. Time should be devoted within taught classes or tutorials to help students understand assessment requirements and to act on feedback they have received. Learning outcomes that assess student ability to act on or reflect on feedback can formalise this in programme design.
- Consider removing closed book time limited examinations, unless required for PSRB accreditation. There is evidence to suggest that traditional exams result in larger gaps. If exams are required, consider whether open book or seen exams are more appropriate.
- Review curriculum content and consider whether it is culturally inclusive. Less culturally sensitive curricula can result in lower levels of interest from minoritised groups. Programme teams may find it useful to assess curricula against existing frameworks such as the Culturally Sensitive Curriculum Scale (Thomas and Quinlan 2021).

Considerations

- How have you engaged in exploring the causes of any awarding gaps and identifying potential solutions? How has their feedback influenced your programme teams' conclusions and actions?
- Where achievement gaps are identified, have they persisted over multiple years? If gaps have closed in some years, were there changes to the programme in those years which might account for the closure?
- Can such gaps be explained by entry qualification type? For example, the gap might be between those with A levels and BTECs, in a subject where Asian students were more likely to take BTECs.
- Can gaps be attributed to specific modules, particularly those with higher weightings towards degree classifications (such as dissertations or placements)?
- Are any learning outcomes more specific or restrictive than they need to be for students to reach expected standards?

Scenario 3: Embedding sustainability

Context

A provider has made attempts to integrate sustainability into their institution, initially as part of their estate's strategy and later in curriculum delivery. The provider underwent a successful scheme of capital expenditure on key infrastructure such as energy and responsible sourcing; however, their approach to sustainability from a curriculum perspective was fragmented and often seen as an additional bolt-on to the core curriculum.

In a major project to overhaul their curriculum framework, the provider recognised the opportunity to integrate sustainability within a graduate attributes framework which underpins curriculum design. This approach allows students to develop sustainability-focused knowledge, skills and behaviours, such as cultural and social awareness, ethical and inclusive practice, and innovation and enterprise.

To ensure consistency in approach, clear guidance was provided to course developers, such as explicit reference to sustainability in course narratives, inclusion of the graduate attributes in module and course learning outcomes, and mapping of the graduate attributes to the teaching, learning and assessment activities across courses.

Considerations

- How do our curriculum development, approval and review process and documentation explicitly include sustainability as part of validation and approval for all programmes?
- Do we provide any training and support for staff developing programmes in sustainability?

Key Practice g - Student involvement

Key Practice g

Student involvement

Students are involved meaningfully in the design, development, approval and modification of programmes and modules

How might providers involve students in module and programme design and approval?

Providers can meaningfully involve students in course design and approval by adopting a range of participatory approaches that embed the student voice throughout the life cycle of programme development. Student panels can provide structured, ongoing insight into the relevance of curricula and the quality of the learning experience. Co-design activities - such as design thinking workshops, sprints, and hackathons - can enable students to collaborate directly with staff in shaping new modules and innovating pedagogic approaches.

Providers can deepen engagement by appointing student project officers or funded student fellows who take on defined roles in curriculum enhancement, contributing research, consultation, and coordination to support academic teams. Empowering students as trainers and facilitators can help build shared capability, allowing students to lead peer discussions or skill building sessions related to curriculum themes. Systematically integrating student experience data - gathered through surveys, learning analytics and qualitative feedback - ensures that course design and approval decisions are evidence informed and aligned with students' real needs and evolving expectations.

Providers are also transparent about where changes to provision called for by students are not feasible. This helps to clarify what is genuinely achievable, rather than leaving space for assumptions that student voice has not been heard or acted upon within the curriculum development process.

Understanding language and terminology

Student involvement starts with acknowledging the differences in language and terminology across the sector and different communities of staff and students who may be involved in the design, development, approval and modification of programmes and modules. Providers are aware of this diversity and ensure they take responsibility for navigating these within their institution and/or any given project.

A starting point may include exploring the following:

- student voice (what students say)
- co-creation (students and staff working together to create knowledge, curricula, research or experiences)
- co-construction (particularly focuses on design and creation together, not just on consultation)
- student engagement (broader participation in learning and institutional life)
- students as partners (students and staff work collaboratively on teaching, learning, assessment or research)
- students as change agents (students identify issues and lead projects or initiatives to enhance their own and others' educational experience).

Not all student involvement is relevant and meaningful when it comes to programmes and modules. Providers are aware that student involvement can range from consultation and feedback to partnership and co-creation, with differing levels of influence over decisions. They consider how power is shared within these processes and take steps to ensure students are able to contribute meaningfully and effectively to the design, development, approval and modification of programmes and modules.

Providers actively involve students in defining what these terms mean locally - avoiding assumptions and ensuring inclusivity. This may include co-developing a glossary of terms with student representatives.

Equity and transparency

Involving students meaningfully in design and approval processes involves considering accessibility for all students to ensure a wide range of representation. This will mean considering the overall demographics of the student body, selecting students to reflect this diversity, as well as using different channels and mediums for recruiting students to course design processes and publishing feedback. Targeted recruitment of students/ participants considers the need for intersectional representation, taking into account diverse student voices.

A range of tools and methods can be adopted, in communicating as well as ways of working. Flexibility in approaches can help providers adapt to different learner styles. Anonymised methods (such as Padlets or polls) may be employed to address imbalances of power in discussions. Publication of summaries of student involvement outcomes on programme web pages can demonstrate transparency.

Defining the roles that students play in programme design, development and governance provides an opportunity to establish clear and shared terms of engagement, demonstrating a commitment to listening to and acting on the student voice. Student involvement may include representation at different stages of curriculum development and within programme governance structures, including through students' unions or equivalent representative bodies where appropriate. Providers ensure that student roles are clearly articulated, that students are supported to represent the wider student perspective rather than individual experience, and that opportunities to contribute are inclusive and accessible. Consideration is also given to proportionality, including workload expectations, recognition or remuneration where appropriate, and the avoidance of bias or over reliance on a small number of students, supporting student involvement as an embedded and sustained cultural practice rather than a discrete or time limited activity.

Feedback can be shown to be meaningful by publishing 'You Said, We Did' documents online, talking about changes made to provision as a direct result of student feedback. Providers can also consider involving students in crafting feedback messages.

Recognition and reward

Providers may not be in a position to reward students for taking part in design and approval processes through financial remuneration. However, they may wish to recognise students' contributions in other ways, for example through employability-focused development opportunities, institutional awards schemes, certificates of participation, digital badges, or recognition within placement and work-based learning activities. Providers consider the support they offer for students contributing in this way, by providing training, recognising students as co-creators, and generating a sense of community and belonging, and showing that they matter - involvement in programme design can enhance students' sense of mattering.

Providers also recognise the barriers and risks facing students which could deter them from becoming involved - they could see it as a tick box process or a gesture towards students as partners. They could perceive it to be additional emotional labour where they are already time poor and under pressure to learn, as well as earn. Providers therefore consider how engagement activities are designed and communicated, ensuring that students understand the purpose of their involvement, how their contributions will influence outcomes, and how feedback will be provided on decisions taken. They also consider practical measures to support participation, such as flexible opportunities for engagement, appropriate recognition of contributions, and approaches that minimise unnecessary burden on students.

Reflective questions

1. How do we define 'meaningful' involvement of students in our context?
2. In what ways are student contributions to programme design currently tokenistic? How could this change?
3. How can we create opportunities for students to engage meaningfully in programme design and approval, in ways that promote genuine collaboration and shared ownership? (Examples might include co-design workshops, student research internships, or student representation on programme boards.)
4. How do we acknowledge and address power imbalances to ensure students are positioned as partners rather than consultees in curriculum development?
5. How do we recruit, train and support students to engage confidently in curriculum development?
6. How do we close the feedback loop with students by communicating how student input has informed programme development, including explaining both the changes made and the reasons why some suggestions have not been adopted?
7. How do we know that changes made based on student input lead to improved experiences?
8. How do we respond if further change is needed?

Scenario

Involving students in reviewing a master's level programme

Context

At the five year review of the MSc in Digital Innovation, the programme team worked in partnership with students rather than relying solely on committees or surveys. A group of paid student project officers conducted empathy interviews with current learners - many international - to explore transition challenges, assessment loads, employability needs, and belonging. Feedback opportunities were promoted through diverse communication channels, with culturally relevant incentives to boost participation. The team synthesised insights into personas and journey maps, revealing issues such as repetitive content and a desire for more real world digital challenges.

A design sprint then brought students, alumni, staff and employers together to prototype curriculum solutions. Students were positioned as co creators, contributing ideas such as a sustainability module with industry input, a rebalanced assessment strategy, and more flexible capstone project options. Crucially, students led several elements of the process: co writing review documentation, facilitating feedback forums, and shaping pilots of proposed changes.

A continuous feedback loop kept students informed through regular, recognisable updates. Project officers received formal recognition through certificates, social events, CV worthy roles, and opportunities to present at a student engagement conference. This collaborative, student partnered approach ensured the redesigned MSc met industry and academic expectations while genuinely reflecting learners' lived experiences, resulting in a more inclusive, connected and future focused programme.

Considerations

- How might we meaningfully involve students - not only as consultees but as co designers - in our own course review or approval processes?
- What mechanisms (such as student partners, culturally relevant incentives, varied communication channels) could help us reach diverse student groups more effectively?
- How could we adapt methods such as empathy interviews, personas or journey mapping to better understand our students' real experiences?
- What opportunities do we have to embed rapid co design activities - like sprints or workshops - in curriculum development cycles?
- How can we build transparent feedback loops and formal recognition so students see the impact of their contributions and feel valued as partners?

Terminology

Term	Definition
Awarding gap	A persistent, statistically significant difference in the proportion of top degrees (1st or 2:1) awarded to different student groups, most notably between white students and Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority students.
Competence Standard	A particular level of competence or ability that a student must demonstrate to be accepted on to, progress within and successfully complete a course or programme of study.
Equity	Ensuring fair treatment, opportunities and outcomes for all by providing resources tailored to individual needs, rather than providing the same, uniform treatment.
Equality	Ensuring every individual has fair treatment, equal opportunities, and access to resources, free from discrimination based on protected characteristics.
Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)	The official measure of relative deprivation in England and part of a suite of outputs that form the Indices of Deprivation (IoD).

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Continue exploring the Advice and Guidance

This publication is part of a suite of Advice and Guidance that accompanies the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2024].

Select the Principles below to access additional guidance, practical considerations and resources that support the enhancement of quality and the maintenance of academic standards.

Principle 1
Taking a strategic approach to managing quality and standards

Principle 2
Engaging students as partners

Principle 3
Resourcing delivery of a high-quality learning experience

Principle 4
Using data to inform and evaluate quality

Principle 5
Monitoring, evaluating, and enhancing provision

Principle 6
Engaging in external quality and standards review and accreditation

Principle 7
Designing, developing, approving, and modifying programmes

Principle 8
Operating partnerships with other organisations

Principle 9
Recruiting, selecting and admitting students

Principle 10
Supporting students to achieve their potential

Principle 11
Teaching, learning and assessment

Principle 12
Operating concerns, complaints and appeals processes

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