

Section A

Introduction to the Quality Handbook

Annexe 1

External Reference Points: Further Information and Extracts

The purpose of this document is to provide information about the external reference points which have influenced the way in which the Quality Handbook has been developed. It is designed to supplement the summary provided in the Introduction to the Quality Handbook (Part I) and the extracts provided for each Code in Part II of the Introduction. It provides a quick guide to the two most significant external reference points, including their key concepts or elements and relevant extracts:

- UK Quality Code for Higher Education (both its 2014 and 2018 versions)
- The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Note that in the UK there are other regulatory bodies and organisations that significantly influence the practice of higher education providers in relation to academic standards and quality, and that the position is further complicated by differences between the four countries of the UK (as higher education is a devolved responsibility in both Scotland and Wales). Examples of regulatory bodies (relevant to academic standards and quality) include:

The Office for Students (OfS) in England

- established under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017; all HE providers in England are required to register with the OfS and to comply with its 'Conditions of Registration'
- OfS incorporated what was the Higher Education Funding Council for England.
- see further <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/#ministerial> and specifically: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/conditions-of-registration/initial-and-general-ongoing-conditions-of-registration/>

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Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA)

- the OIA is the body responsible for reviewing student complaints in the UK, established under the Higher Education Act 2004
- it is empowered to review universities and colleges' handling of academic appeals and student complaints
- students can ask the OIA to review but only after the internal procedures of the relevant university/college have been exhausted
- it is not technically a regulatory body (it has no direct powers over universities) but it will 'name and shame' if a university decides not to comply with the OIA's recommendations
- it also develops guidance, including a good practice framework, to encourage better complaints handling in the HE sector.
- see further: <http://www.oiahe.org.uk/about-us.aspx> and especially <http://www.oiahe.org.uk/providers-and-good-practice/good-practice-framework.aspx>
- note that while the OIA operates UK-wide, Scottish universities are also subject to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), established under the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002; it also provides a process of independent review. (Unlike the OIA, the SPSO covers all public services in Scotland.) Universities are under a statutory requirement to comply with the Model Complaints Handling Procedures published by the SPSO. See further <https://www.spsso.org.uk/>.

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)

- <https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/>
- the regulatory body for higher education in Wales, which is funded by, and accountable to, the Welsh Government
- established by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992
- it distributes funds and promotes learning and teaching development, particularly the quality of the learning experience
- it currently contracts QAA to carry out reviews of universities in Wales (called Quality Enhancement Review: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review>).

Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

- <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/>
- a similar body to HEFCW including providing funding to Scottish universities
- it is a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government
- SFC also engages QAA to carry out reviews of Scottish universities (called Enhancement-Led Institutional Review: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review>).

UK QUALITY CODE (2014)

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/UK-Quality-Code-for-Higher-Education-2013-18>

The Quality Code was developed comprising the following elements:

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- Expectations
- Indicators of Sound Practice
- Explanatory text.

It was published in three parts (plus a General Introduction explaining the purpose of the Code and how it was designed to work):

Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards (containing three chapters)

Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality (containing 11 chapters)

Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision (a single chapter).

Terminology

The following quotes and definitions are from the General Introduction:

Expectations

‘Expectations express key principles that the higher education community has identified as essential for the assurance of academic standards and quality. They make clear what UK higher education providers are required to do, what they expect of themselves and each other, and what students and the general public can therefore expect of them. Individual providers are required to demonstrate they are meeting the Expectations effectively, through their own management and organisational processes, taking account of organisational needs, traditions, culture and decision-making.’

Expectations were designed as the mandatory element of the Code and provided the basis for cyclical external reviews of each higher education provider conducted by the QAA. Such reviews led to a published report for each provider. Since the 2014 version was established arrangements for external review have changed significantly, primarily in England; see further regarding the Office for Students (above).

Indicators of sound practice

‘Indicators describe activities which higher education providers have agreed reflect sound practice, and through which higher education providers can demonstrate that they are meeting the relevant Expectation. Indicators are not designed to be used as a checklist; they are intended to help providers reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices to demonstrate that the Expectations in the Quality Code are being met. The Indicators are grouped into clusters under a heading.’

Explanatory notes

‘Expectations and Indicators are supported by explanatory notes that give more information, together with examples of how the Expectation or Indicator may be interpreted in practice. The application of any examples given will depend on the circumstances of a particular provider. The examples are best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as models for imitation.’

The Expectations

The following provides the Expectations in full.

Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards

Chapter A1 - UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards

In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland/The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland are met by:

- positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications
- awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

Chapter A2 - Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards - Expectation A2.1

In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

Definitive records of individual programmes and qualifications - Expectation A2.2

Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

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

Expectation A3.1

Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which

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meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.

Assessment of learning outcomes - Expectation A3.2

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

- the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment
- both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree-awarding body have been satisfied.

Monitoring and review of alignment with UK threshold academic standards and degree-awarding bodies' own

Standards Expectation A3.3

Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

Externality - Expectation A3.4

In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

- UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved
- the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.

Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality

B1 – Programme Design, Development and Approval

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

B2 - Recruitment, Selection and Admission

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

B3 – Learning and Teaching

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

B4 - Enabling Student Development and Achievement

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

B5 – Student Engagement

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

B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning

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

Chapter B7: External Examining

Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.

Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review

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

Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints

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

Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others

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

Chapter B11: Research Degrees

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

Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

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

UK QUALITY CODE (2018)

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>

The 2014 version of the Quality Code was revised by QAA again in partnership with higher education providers, representative bodies, students and other stakeholders. The 'top level' elements – the Expectations and Core Practices – were published in May 2018, followed by publication of 12 chapters of 'Advice and Guidance' and the official launch in November 2018. The way in which the Code is going to be applied will differ between the four countries of the UK, reflecting differences in the regulatory arrangements in each case. However, from a University of Gibraltar perspective the Code provides valuable further guidance and a means for benchmarking its approach.

The 2018 version contains the following hierarchy of elements:

- Expectations (two each for academic standards and quality)
- Core practices (four for standards, eight for quality)
- Common practices (one for standards, three for quality)
- Advice and Guidance (12 themes)
- Guiding Principles (a number of Principles in each piece of Advice and Guidance).

NB: the 2018 version does not use any form of numbering for Expectations, Core or Common Practices or for the 12 Advice and Guidance themes. The revised Code also does not have a specific section or separate focus on Information in contrast with the 2014 version.

Terminology

Expectations

These 'express the outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision. They are mandatory requirements for all UK providers.'

Core practices

These 'represent effective ways of working that underpin the delivery of the Expectations and result in positive outcomes for students. They are mandatory requirements for all UK providers.'

Common practices

These 'focus on enhancement. They are mandatory requirements for all providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England, providers may wish to work towards these, but are not required to do so as they are not regulatory requirements and will not be assessed as part of the OfS's regulatory framework.'

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Advice and guidance

‘Made up of sector-developed themes, designed to support providers in developing and maintaining effective quality assurance practices. This is not mandatory for providers, but illustrative of a range of possible approaches.’

Guiding Principles

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

Expectations and Practices: Standards

Expectations

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

The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualifications and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.

Core Practices

The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks.

The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.

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

Common Practices

The provider reviews its core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

Expectations and Practices: Quality

Expectations

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

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

Core Practices

The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.

The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.

The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.

The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.

Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.

Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.

The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes..

Common Practices

The provider reviews its core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.

The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.

Advice and guidance

This is divided into the following 12 themes:

- Admissions, recruitment and widening access
- Assessment
- Concerns, complaints and appeals
- Course design and development
- Enabling student achievement
- External expertise
- Learning and teaching

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- Monitoring and evaluation
- Partnerships
- Research degrees
- Student engagement
- Work-based learning.

EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES (2015)

https://enga.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) were first adopted by Ministers in the European Higher Education Area in 2005, with the most recent version adopted at the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015. The document defines the purposes of the ESG as follows:

- ‘-- They set a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional level;
- They enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European higher education area;
- They support mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;
- They provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA.’

The ESG are divided into three parts:

- Part I: Internal quality assurance
- Part II: External quality assurance
- Part III: Quality assurance agencies.

Note the full title is: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Terminology

Standards

‘The standards set out agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA and should, therefore, be taken account of and adhered to by those concerned, in all types of higher education provision.’

Guidelines

‘The guidelines explain why the standard is important and describe how standards might be implemented. They set out good practice in the relevant area for consideration by the actors involved in quality assurance. Implementation will vary depending on different contexts.’

The Standards

The following sets out the Standards applicable to internal quality assurance (Part I of the ESG)

Policy for Quality Assurance (1.1)

Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

Design and approval of programmes (1.2)

Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment (1.3)

Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

Student admission, progression, recognition and certification (1.4)

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Teaching staff (1.5)

Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

Learning resources and student support (1.6)

Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

Information management (1.7)

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

Public information (1.8)

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.

On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes (1.9)

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

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Cyclical external quality assurance (1.10)

Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

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