



**QAA**

A large graphic composed of several interlocking puzzle pieces. The central piece is a dark grey circle containing the text 'UK Quality Code for Higher Education'. Surrounding it are several other pieces in shades of grey and green, some of which are partially cut off by the edges of the page.

# UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Part B: Assuring and enhancing  
academic quality

Chapter B1: Programme design and approval

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# Introduction

The following supersedes parts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review (2006)*, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and forms a Chapter of the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

## The Quality Code

The Quality Code is the definitive reference point for all those involved in delivering higher education which leads to an award from or is validated by a UK higher education provider. It makes clear what institutions are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of all higher education providers. These Expectations express key matters of principle that the higher education community has identified as important for the assurance of quality and academic standards.

Each Chapter of the Quality Code comprises a series of Indicators which higher education providers have agreed reflect sound practice, and through which institutions can demonstrate that they are meeting the relevant Expectations.

## About this Chapter

Each Indicator has been developed by QAA through an extensive process of consultation with higher education providers; their representative bodies; the National Union of Students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs); and other interested parties. Indicators are not designed to be used as a checklist; they are intended to help institutions reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices to demonstrate that the Expectations in the Quality Code are being met.

Each Indicator is numbered and printed in bold, and is supported by an explanatory note giving more information about its purpose and context.

## Introduction to this Chapter

This Chapter of the Quality Code takes as its starting point the principle that formal and effective procedures should exist in all institutions for the design and approval of programmes of study. It recognises institutions' own responsibilities to assure the standards of their awards and quality of the students' learning experiences.

For the purpose of this Chapter of the Code a programme is defined as an approved curriculum followed by a registered student. This will normally be a named award route that leads to the intended learning outcomes set out in the relevant programme specification (see *Chapter A3: The programme level*). Programmes may be offered at different levels within a single subject. A programme may be multidisciplinary, for example, a joint honours degree or a combined honours degree. The term programme may also refer to the main pathways through a modular scheme, which may itself include several subjects. In many institutions programmes are constructed from individual units or modules which have their own outcomes. The principles of design and approval that are set out in this Chapter of the Quality Code may, where appropriate, be equally applied to such units.

Programme design is a creative and often an innovative activity. The processes used by institutions to approve, monitor and review academic programmes should foster creativity, and encourage a culture of continuous enhancement of provision.

At the end of this Chapter there are three appendices. Appendices two and three are intended to provide institutions with a framework of the kinds of questions that might be considered by, on the one hand, programme designers and, on the other, approval and review panels.

Users of this Chapter of the Quality Code are also recommended to refer to other Chapters, in particular:

- *Chapter A1: The national level*
- *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level*
- *Chapter A3: The programme level*
- *Chapter A4: Approval and review*
- *Chapter A5: Externality*
- *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*
- *Chapter B10: Management of collaborative arrangements*

In particular, the rationale underlying this Chapter of the Quality Code is that programme design, approval, monitoring and review are linked, and that the processes involved need to be seen in a holistic and integrated manner. Good programme design creates programmes that facilitate the delivery of the intended learning outcomes and required standards, and is fundamental when institutions approve new programmes or review the effectiveness of existing provision. Where practices for the initial design and approval of programmes are rigorous and effective, subsequent evaluation is likely to be relatively straightforward. Duplication of effort and documentation can be reduced if the requirements of external bodies, such as PSRBs and QAA, are taken into account when programmes are designed, approved and reviewed. This Chapter should therefore be read in close conjunction with *Chapter A4: Approval and review* and *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*.

## Expectations about programme design and approval

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about programme design and approval, which higher education institutions are required to meet.

**Higher education providers have effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.**

The following Expectation is also relevant to this topic:

**Higher education providers have in place effective processes to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of programmes (*Chapter A4: Approval and review*).**

# Indicators of sound practice

## General principles

### Indicator 1

**Institutions ensure that their responsibilities for standards and quality are discharged effectively through their procedures for the design and approval of programmes.**

The design and approval of programmes are central to an institution's assurance of the quality and standards of its provision. When evaluating policies and practices for programme design and approval against this Indicator, it is important to consider whether due account is taken of:

- external reference points, including any relevant subject benchmark statements, national frameworks for higher education qualifications and, where appropriate, the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), employers and any relevant national legislation/national commitments to European and international processes
- the compatibility of programme proposals and developments with institutional goals and mission
- strategic academic and resource planning
- existing provision within the institution, including any awards that may be offered jointly with other UK or overseas institutions
- the level of risk involved in each approval process and the optimal level of resource necessary to ensure that the required outcomes of the process are achieved.

### Indicator 2

**Institutions ensure that the overriding responsibility of the academic authority (for example senate or academic board) to set, maintain and assure standards is respected and that any delegation of power by the academic authority to approve programmes is properly defined and exercised.**

It is important that the respective roles, responsibilities and authority of different bodies involved in programme design and approval are clearly defined in order that staff and students involved in such processes are clear about the hierarchy of procedures and about which body will take final responsibility. The evaluation of any delegated power is important in allowing the institution to ensure that it is continuing to operate its processes in an effective manner.

### Indicator 3

**Institutions make use of external participation at key stages for the approval of programmes, as independence and objectivity are essential to provide confidence that the standards and quality of the programmes are appropriate.**

External participation is important for ensuring that programmes are designed, developed and approved in the light of independent advice and for ensuring both transparency of process and confirmation of standards. Such external participation provides assurance at various levels: to the team delivering the programme and to the institution itself in monitoring the independence and objectivity of decisions taken under its procedures; to its students; and to any reviewers who may carry out reviews/ audits that are external to the institution's own processes.

It is important that institutions ensure they make use of external contributions of an appropriate kind when developing and approving programmes. External examiners may provide useful contributions at various stages of approval processes but, for the purpose of demonstrating impartiality, they are unlikely to be appropriate members of formal approval panels. It is also important that this external participation is proportionate to the level, importance and complexity of the process being followed. Useful contributions could be made in different ways by, for example:

- external advisers who provide relevant information and guidance on current developments in the discipline(s). In considering the guidance provided by academic peers from other institutions, the Higher Education Academy may be a useful resource in providing access to staff working in specific subject areas
- academic peers from other disciplines within the institution
- any programme partners, for example, institutions with which there are collaborative arrangements
- students with an appropriate representative role
- appropriate PSRBs
- external sources and advisers who provide relevant information and guidance on current developments including, for example, in the workplace (see Appendix 3 for illustrative examples of such sources).

The use of appropriate externality in processes for programme design may also allow an institution to avail itself of opportunities for enhancement, as well as for assurance.

### Indicator 4

**Approval processes are clearly described and communicated to those who are involved in them.**

It is important that processes for approval of programmes are understood by all those who are involved or who have an interest in them. The following may help institutions as they consider the clarity and accessibility of their processes:

- the publication of clear principles and procedures for the approval of programmes, that are available to all staff and students in the institution and to external participants in the processes
- the clear statement of the different stages of approval and the clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of participants (see Indicator 2)
- the clear definition of the responsibility for initiating the process of primary consideration of programmes
- how staff development strategies and activities may include the dissemination of good practice in relation to programme design and approval.

## Programme design

### Indicator 5

**Institutions publish, or make available, the principles to be considered when programmes are designed and developed, the fulfilment of which will be tested at the approval stage.**

Proper design and development of a programme is crucial for ensuring that it is relevant and sustainable. It is also important for its successful delivery. If the design processes are well thought through and operate effectively, they can assist in the successful operation of later approval, monitoring and review procedures. There are many principles and reference points that may be considered when designing and developing a new programme. These include:

- the institution's goals and mission
- the intended aims of the programme
- the level of the programme - its intellectual challenge and value - and its place in a national and/or European qualifications framework
- external reference points, including any relevant subject benchmark statements, any European reference points, national qualifications frameworks for higher education and, where appropriate, the requirements of PSRBs and employers
- the role of students in the design and development of programmes
- the concept of progression, so that the curriculum imposes an increasing level of demand on the learner during the course of the programme (see Appendix 2 for an explanation of level)
- opportunities which might be available to students on completion of a programme
- the balance of the programme, for example, in relation to academic and practical elements, personal development and academic outcomes, breadth and depth in the curriculum
- the coherence of the programme, to ensure that the overall experience of a student has a logic and an intellectual integrity that are related to clearly defined purposes (see Appendix 2)

- the requirements of external bodies, such as PSRBs and QAA. Duplication of effort and documentation can be reduced if these are taken into account when programmes are designed and approved
- the award title, to ensure it reflects the intended learning outcomes of the programme
- how the intended learning outcomes of the programme will be promoted, demonstrated and assessed
- that the necessary resources are available to support the programme.

In those cases where a module programme may be negotiated by an individual student, with guidance and agreement from the institution, the design principles should, in particular, inform the policies and procedures within which such negotiation takes place.

A set of criteria for programme design, which institutions might find helpful to consider when determining their own guidance, is described briefly in Appendix 2. It is presented as a series of questions that those designing and developing programmes may wish to ask themselves as they go through the process. It is relevant to all programmes but 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. It may also be useful for those staff working in collaborative partnerships with other institutions.

## Programme approval

### Indicator 6

**Institutions ensure that programme approval decisions are informed by full consideration of academic standards and of the appropriateness of the learning opportunities which will be offered to students, and that:**

- **the final decision to approve a programme is taken by the academic authority, or a body acting on its behalf that is independent of the academic department, or other unit that offers the programme, and has access to any necessary specialist advice**
- **there is a confirmation process, which demonstrates that a programme has fulfilled any conditions set out during the approval process and that due consideration has been given to any recommendations.**

With regard to the responsibility of an individual institution for the assurance of the quality and standards of its awards, and in the interests of transparency, it is important that there is a clear designation of the body responsible for approving a programme and for ensuring that all conditions have been met before the programme begins.

It is important for institutions to be clear about the type of process that is appropriate to different kinds of approval; for example, for a new programme, a new module/unit, or a change in the balance of assessment within a module/unit. It may be helpful for this decision to be based on proportionality and risk analysis, with institutions making informed decisions about the kind of process and level of externality that will be appropriate.



During the period of design, approval and commencement of a new programme, the following may be considered (some institutions have a two-stage approval process and will want to consider which of the following are appropriate to which stage):

- the design principles underpinning the programme
- the definition and appropriateness of standards in accordance with the level and title of the award
- the necessary resources to support the programme
- anticipated demand for the programme
- monitoring and review arrangements for the programme
- the length of time for which approval is granted
- the contents of the programme specification
- the nature of the learning opportunities offered by the programme
- the development of the programme between its approval and start
- the relationship between the programme's curriculum and current research in the same area.

## Evaluation of processes

### Indicator 7

**Institutions have a means of assessing the effectiveness of their programme design, approval, monitoring and review practices.**

Evaluation of processes can provide a focus for enhancement and will allow institutions to consider:

- the benefits gained by the institution, staff, students and other stakeholders from the approval activities undertaken
- how the outcomes of processes promote enhancement of students' learning experiences
- the identification and dissemination of effective practice, both internally and externally
- opportunities to make approval practices more effective and efficient
- whether the institution, through its processes, is managing risk appropriately and proportionately for its portfolio of programmes.

# Appendix 1: The Indicators

## Expectations about programme design and approval

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about programme design and approval, which higher education institutions are required to meet.

**Higher education providers have effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.**

## The Indicators

### Indicator 1

Institutions ensure that their responsibilities for standards and quality are discharged effectively through their procedures for the design and approval of programmes.

### Indicator 2

Institutions ensure that the overriding responsibility of the academic authority (for example senate or academic board) to set, maintain and assure standards is respected and that any delegation of power by the academic authority to approve programmes is properly defined and exercised.

### Indicator 3

Institutions make use of external participation at key stages for the approval of programmes, as independence and objectivity are essential to provide confidence that the standards and quality of the programmes are appropriate.

### Indicator 4

Approval processes are clearly described and communicated to those who are involved in them.

### Indicator 5

Institutions publish, or make available, the principles to be considered when programmes are designed and developed, the fulfilment of which will be tested at the approval stage.

### Indicator 6

Institutions ensure that programme approval decisions are informed by full consideration of academic standards and of the appropriateness of the learning opportunities which will be offered to students, and that:

- the final decision to approve a programme is taken by the academic authority, or a body acting on its behalf that is independent of the academic department, or other unit that offers the programme, and has access to any necessary specialist advice

- there is a confirmation process, which demonstrates that a programme has fulfilled any conditions set out during the approval process and that due consideration has been given to any recommendations.

**Indicator 7**

Institutions have a means of assessing the effectiveness of their programme design, approval, monitoring and review practices.

## Appendix 2

This Appendix does not form part of the Quality Code. It is included to provide a series of prompts for institutions to consider when determining their own guidance on programme design and for providers to use when working with institutional processes in this area. It may prove useful for staff development purposes and as guidance for any participants in the design and approval process(es) who are external to the institution.

In many institutions programmes are constructed from individual units, or modules, which have their own outcomes. The principles of design, approval, monitoring and review that are set out in this Chapter of the Quality Code may, where appropriate, be applied equally to such units or modules. In those cases where a modular programme may be negotiated by an individual student, with guidance and agreement from the institution, the design principles in particular should inform the policies and procedures within which such negotiation takes place.

Academic programmes fulfil a range of purposes including the provision of personal academic development, preparation for knowledge creation and research, preparation for specific (often professional) employment or for general employment, or as preparation for lifelong learning. Understanding and defining the balance of purposes is important in order to design a curriculum and to provide the related learning opportunities that will enable the stated intended learning outcomes to be achieved. Institutions should aim to design and deliver programmes that reflect current knowledge and best practice, and meet the requirements of the student target group and the goals and strategic plans of the institution.

### Design criteria

- Do the institutional guidelines for the design of programmes allow for the promotion of good practice in programme design?
- Do they provide the assurance that standards are set appropriately and intended learning outcomes specified accordingly?

### Level

At what level is the programme being designed/evaluated?

- What is the level of the intended learning outcomes for the programme for any named stages in the programme? (A level is an Indicator of the relative demand, complexity, depth of study and learner autonomy involved in a programme. Various systems are currently in use to identify levels, including descriptors indicating the intellectual and skill attainment expected of students.)
- What is the location of the programme on *The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*? Are there any European or other reference points that should be considered with regard to level?

## Progression

- Does the curriculum promote progression so that the demands on the learner in intellectual challenge, skills, knowledge, conceptualisation and learning autonomy increase?

## Flexibility

- Has the range of requirements of learners likely to enter the programme been considered?

## Coherence

- Has the overall coherence and intellectual integrity of the programme been considered?
- Has the programme been designed in a way that will ensure the student's experiences have a logic and integrity that are clearly linked to the purpose of the programme?
- Have the academic and practical elements and opportunities for personal development and the academic outcomes been considered?
- Have the breadth and depth of the subject material to be included in the programme been determined?

## Integrity

- Are the expectations given to students and others about the intended learning outcomes of the programme realistic and deliverable?
- Has the feasibility of attainment of the outcomes been considered?

## Reference points

Have internal and external points of reference been used to inform the design of the programme? (External reference points might be provided by a subject benchmark statement, information about similar or parallel programmes elsewhere or expectations of PSRBs, or employer expectations (for example, as set out in occupational standards). In a student negotiated programme, an inherent part of the negotiation process will involve the student and tutor, in designing the programme, taking into consideration the intended level of the award and jointly agreeing the relevant sources of reference.)

## Appendix 3

The following websites may provide further sources of information.

- The Higher Education Academy ([www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk))
- Information on external review processes operated by QAA ([www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk))
- The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ([www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu))
- *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (March 2005) ([www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso](http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso))

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