QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

FACT SHEET 2: FRAMEWORK FOR ACADEMIC QUALITY AND STANDARDS

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has overseen the development of a UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) which provides a national ‘quality framework’ for qualifications in UK higher education institutions.

2 The Quality Code sets out the Expectations that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet and gives all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes and the quality of learning opportunities they provide. Higher education academic standards and quality. QAA reviewers will use it as the main reference point for their review work.

3 This Factsheet describes how the University relates to that framework, and the University’s own framework for the approval of qualifications and modules.

The Frameworks for Qualifications in Higher Education

4 The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (Qualifications Frameworks) is published by the QAA as part of the Quality Code, Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards. The frameworks provide guidance on the titles and structures of qualifications, and describe the achievement represented by higher education qualifications. There are two separate frameworks:

5 For England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) is limited to levels and descriptors for qualifications in the HE sector only and consists of five levels:
   - Certificate level: Certificate of Higher Education
   - Intermediate level: Diploma of Higher Education, Foundation Degree, Bachelors degree without honours
   - Honours level: BA/BSc (Honours) degrees
   - Masters level: MA/MSc degrees
   - Doctoral level: doctoral degrees

6 For Scotland The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS) developed by the Scottish education sector, includes credit and qualification levels spanning its national qualifications from secondary school level upwards, its Higher National qualifications, HEI qualifications and Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

7 The OU qualifications framework is consistent with the Frameworks for Qualifications in Higher Education.

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1 Links to external and internal websites were checked in September 2016. Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff.
A **Levels framework for the OU** has been developed which provides a set of generic level indicators to support curriculum design, and teaching and learning development within the OU at undergraduate levels 1, 2 and 3. It also includes a statement of aims and abilities intended to describe the overall attributes of an OU graduate. The level indicators are compatible with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

**QAA Subject Benchmark Statements**

These are designed to make explicit the general academic characteristics and standards of honours degrees in the UK. The University’s qualification approval process requires commentary on the use of external reference points including these statements. As the statements are developed, the implications for each qualification are considered in faculties, and Boards of Studies are asked to consider the impact of any proposals to change components in the qualification on its overall learning outcomes.

**Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality**

Part B of the Quality Code comprises a range of Chapters concerned with academic quality and how well the learning opportunities made available to students enable them to achieve their award. Each Chapter sets out an Expectation which higher education providers are required to meet to ensure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided for students; that the learning opportunities provided are monitored; and that the provider considers how to improve them. The Expectation in each Chapter is accompanied by a series of Indicators that reflect sound practice, and through which providers can demonstrate they are meeting the relevant Expectation.

Within the University, the relevant committee or business area(s) comment on mappings of current policy and practice matched to the Indicators (and to a lesser extent, the explanatory text), and whether the Code raises any issues for consideration within the University. The mappings of OU policies and procedures against each Chapter of the Quality Code are approved by the University’s Academic Quality & Governance Committee, and are made available to staff on its intranet site under [OU Quality Systems](https://qualitysystems.open.ac.uk).

**Programme Specifications (definitive records)**

Institutions are expected to maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) ([QAA Quality Code Part A](https://www.qaa.ac.uk), Expectation A2.2). Definitive records can assume a variety of forms of which the programme specification is one. In the Open University Programme Specifications are referred to as Qualification Specifications which include the intended outcomes of a qualification in terms of its academic requirements and the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion i.e.

- Key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn
- Cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis
- Subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills
- Practical and/or professional skills

The Qualification proforma used in the approval of a new qualification proposal includes the specification of intended outcomes of the qualification.
National Credit Frameworks

14 Credit frameworks are threshold reference points for those designing and approving academic programmes where credit is awarded, and bring consistency of approach to the use of credit.

15 Most, but not all, degree-awarding bodies in England and Northern Ireland use credit-based systems in the design and management of their taught curricula and have done so for many years. The Higher education credit framework for England: Guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England is used by degree-awarding bodies which award UK credit for higher education programmes in England and Northern Ireland. This framework complements the FHEQ in providing guidance on the use of credit in the design of programmes leading to the main higher education qualifications awarded in England and Northern Ireland.

16 Both Scotland and Wales have overarching, integrated credit and qualifications frameworks which span all levels of education and vocational training, including higher education: the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales. As a result of national agreements, all degree-awarding bodies in Scotland and in Wales use credit as a basis for their higher education qualifications.

17 The principles of all the UK credit frameworks are common to all. One credit represents ten notional hours of learning (an estimate of how long it will take a typical student, on average, to achieve the learning outcomes including not only formal contact hours but time spent in preparation for classes, private or independent reading and study, revision and the completion of assessment).

18 The University has structured its qualifications in order to offer students optimal flexibility. Students may register for and study a single module, or accumulate credit in a degree or other qualification programme. Module credits are expressed in CATS (Credit Accumulation and Transfer System) credits. The University offers modules in quantities of 60, 30, 15 and 10 credits. At present most undergraduate modules are rated as 30 or 60 credits. The tariff (also used for OU Validated Qualifications) assumes that a full-time student at undergraduate level would normally study for 1200 hours a year, to complete 120 CATS credits, thus an Open University 60 credit module requires a notional learning time, as defined by the credit frameworks, of about 600 hours. Students are permitted to study a maximum equivalent of 120 credits in an academic year.

Curriculum Strategy

19 The University’s Curriculum Strategy ‘Fit for Future’ (S-2015-01-08) provides a framework for managing the OU’s curriculum portfolio. It will ensure that the curriculum:

- is an effective vehicle for taking forward the University’s mission and values;
- actively supports the University’s key middle-tier strategies, in particular Widening Participation, Employer Engagement, the Four Nations and International Strategies;
- is cost effective and sustainable, and responsive to the University’s overall financial position;
- enables the University to define the qualities and skills gained through study with the OU.

Qualification Approval

20 In the Open University a new qualification proposal is evaluated using a qualification specification proforma which has been developed with reference to the QAA guidelines
mentioned above. Guidance on qualification approval including the number and level of credit points required for each qualification type and the specification of qualification outcomes is published for staff on the University’s internal Curriculum Management Guide. The University’s qualification approval arrangements meet the precepts in the QAA Quality Code Chapter B1: Programme design, development and approval.

21 All new taught qualifications must secure institutional approval. The qualification approval process aims to ensure that each new qualification is consistent with the University’s curriculum and takes account of external and internal requirements. The Research Degrees Committee is responsible to the Research Committee and Senate for all policy, regulatory and procedural matters relating to research degrees.

External Assessment of Qualifications in Development

22 Boards of Studies are required to consult with an appropriate External Adviser in the development of new qualifications. Should the External Advisers appointed to the Board of Studies not have the relevant expertise for the new qualification subject area, an External Qualification Assessor may be appointed.

Qualification Regulations and Rules

23 Conditions of Registration and Student Regulations cover areas such as the terms and conditions of registration for students, assessment regulations, general qualification regulations and statements of service. There are, in addition, qualification regulations which govern each qualification.

The Code of Practice for Assessment and a Code of Practice for Matters of Student Discipline include information about what the University classifies as disciplinary offences, penalties that may be imposed, and the arrangements which are available to students if they are in dispute with the University.

Recognition of Prior Learning Policy

24 The University offers recognition of prior learning through a credit transfer service for students seeking to use credit from external bodies towards an Open University distance-taught qualification. The University also offers direct entry where previous study would mean a student has the required skills and experience to commence study at a later stage of a qualification. Where an external qualification does not have a credit rating, recognition of prior learning into an Open University distance-taught qualification can be achieved through assessment and quality assurance undertaken by a Faculty.

25 Cases to establish a credit rating for study from elsewhere as recognition of prior learning into a specific Open University distance-taught qualification are prepared by the relevant Board of Studies. Decisions are made by the Teaching Committee of the relevant Faculty, with oversight by Qualifications and Assessment Committee. This process is also followed for the approval of external qualification for direct entry to a qualification.

26 The Qualifications and Assessment Committee is responsible for policy and regulations relating to recognition of prior learning, making recommendations to the Education Committee. It also monitors and reviews policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning, reporting findings to the Education Committee.

27 The Teaching Committees of each Faculty are responsible (on behalf of the Education Committee) for the approval of recognition of prior learning policy for individual taught
qualifications and, in consultation as appropriate with the Curriculum Partnerships Committee, for agreements with other institutions.

28 The Qualifications and Assessment Committee has oversight (on behalf of Senate) recognition of prior learning to applicants and students towards the University’s taught qualifications based on study undertaken outside the University in accordance with established regulations. It also identifies and considers recognition of prior learning issues particularly those involving the status and recognition of the University’s modules and qualifications arising from discussions with other institutions and from national and international developments, and co-ordinates the University’s response to consultative documents and reports on such issues.

29 Recognition of Prior Learning Policy is supported by Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships with operational activity undertaken by the Credit Transfer Centre. Information for students is available at http://www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/.

**Module Approval**

30 University policy in relation to module approval is determined principally by the Education Committee - subject to the approval of Senate. This ensures that Senate retains its statutory authority over the development of the curriculum and that the curriculum as a whole remains consistent with the University’s agreed objectives.

31 Approval of the detailed plans for individual modules is a matter that requires subject expertise, and is devolved to the central academic units for modules that are given outline approval alongside the unit’s agreed Plans.

Proposals for new modules emerge by a variety of means:

- reviews of the external environment, social and demographics trends;
- the need to replace or update modules to reflect changes to the subject matter of new methods of teaching and assessment;
- business appraisal, market surveys, sales forecasts;
- the requirements of professional or statutory bodies, or other influences on academic standards;
- feedback on module presentation.

**Module Materials Development**

32 The module materials are the most important learning and information resources in the Open University’s system of Supported Open Learning. They are specially designed to take the place of lectures, seminars and some library-based study which students would undertake at conventional universities. Study materials may include a series of specially written module texts; study guides; DVDs, CDs; textbooks and specially commissioned collections of articles; resource files; online learning materials and services including Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and on-line computer forums and library facilities.

33 The module team approach to the development of a new module involves continuous peer group review of content and design. Throughout development and production, the module team monitors, discusses and revises draft module material, which is subjected to a process of collective criticism and development. This process is also applied to the academic content in a wider sense, the teaching of the subject matter, and the examination and assessment policy.
The Module team Chair provides the academic leadership to the Team. Other members might include writing academics, academic reading members (including, in many cases, Associate Lecturers), a representative of Learning and Teaching Solutions to assist with the preparation of learning materials, a curriculum manager responsible for administrative arrangements of module production. The exact mix depends upon the requirements of the individual module.

The Module Team carries the academic responsibility for ensuring the quality of the University's teaching of each module. It has a range of tasks:

- the definition and development of the intellectual subject matter of the module;
- the identification and development of the teaching strategy, integrating the range of available resources for teaching and student support;
- creating and implementing the appropriate assessment strategy for the module;
- ensuring the production of high quality teaching materials;
- planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing the presentation of the module to students.

The Team reviews module material at each stage of drafting, taking into account the comments of the External Assessor (see below) and the results of any developmental testing of the materials.

The quality of module material is achieved through the contributions of the module team, with external assessment and rigorous procedures for all aspects of content design and development, but also through the contribution of specialists in editing, rights, design and illustration, photography, audio-visual, multimedia and software design, and a wide range of operational staff.

**External Assessment of Modules in Development** - All module teams are required to nominate an External Module Assessor who is authorised by the relevant academic unit and appointed by the University. Only persons of sufficient seniority, experience and academic reputation may be appointed to this post e.g. at professorial level, senior lectureship level etc. Appointment procedures, job description, draft contract and the required contents of reports are specified by institutional policy and procedures. The External Assessor:

- assesses the structure, balance, coverage and level of the overall content of the module, the effectiveness of its teaching material, its approach to teaching of any practical components, and its treatment of issues relating to gender and minorities.
- gives feedback to the module team throughout the module's development and provides an interim and final report. Their reports may be made available as public documents, so contributing to the University's openness about academic standards, and transparency of the process by which they are achieved.

In addition to the appointment of External Assessors, module teams may appoint consultants to help with writing module texts, design of experiments to be conducted by students, and for other purposes.

**OU Library**

The Open University Library is both a physical and virtual library offering expertise and advice in the use of its collection of learning and information resources. The Library’s role includes supporting module development, student learning and the University’s research activity. The Library makes a range of services available to support module development including advice at module team meetings, selection and cataloguing of module specific material.
websites for ROUTES\(^2\), acquisition, maintenance and promotion of appropriate electronic Library resources, help in identifying appropriate text books, audio-visual and multimedia resources, providing expertise and advice on integrating information literacy into the curriculum, reference checking/information gathering for module team members, training and workshop sessions to help academics develop their own online searching and knowledge of information resources, advice on re-versioning material, alerting module teams to new services and resources.

**PLANET and Vantage**

The route from initial proposal to module in presentation is tracked on the University’s PLANET (PLAnning on the NET) system, designed to support:

- the planning and approval of modules and qualifications;
- the planning, approval, scheduling and mailing of module materials;
- other operational activities in Learning, Innovation and Academic Services and elsewhere that require product information.

Planet is being replaced by Vantage as the University’s curriculum management system.

**Qualification-module Links**

Proposals for a link between a module and a qualification can be made either as part of the approval of a new qualification, or as an additional link to an existing qualification. Such proposals must be approved by the relevant Board of Studies, and for cross-faculty links by the academic unit hosting the qualification and by the academic unit hosting the module.