QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

FACT SHEET 3: INTERNAL REVIEW

Overview

1. Open University modules, qualifications and qualifications managed by a Board of Studies are subject to review processes throughout their life to ensure that the high quality of academic provision is maintained or improved and that any problems are identified and addressed quickly. Services to students are also annually reviewed. Quantitative information about teaching quality for the Open University and all other UK Universities is available at http://www.unistats.com/

2. The Academic Quality & Governance Committee is responsible to the Senate for assuring the effectiveness of the University’s arrangements for managing academic quality and standards, for overseeing the University’s engagement with external quality assessment and assuring the effectiveness of academic governance.

3. The University’s arrangements for internal review address the UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B8 Programme monitoring and review.

Internal review is supported by a range of processes, which are undertaken in accordance with policy and strategy agreed at University level, including:

- monitoring of student recruitment, retention, performance and progress;
- monitoring of student satisfaction with qualifications, modules and services;
- input from external assessors (modules in development), external examiners (modules in presentation) external advisers/ external qualification assessors (qualifications in production) and external advisers (qualifications in presentation);
- feedback from academic staff concerned with development and delivery of academic provision.

Annual Qualification level review

4. The terms of reference for Boards of Studies include responsibility for the quality of the qualifications in their remit. Each Board of Studies is asked to approve their Annual Quality Review (AQR) report for submission to the University on the recent performance of the undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules and qualifications either delivered directly to the student body or via partnership for which a Board of Studies is responsible.

5. The AQR report comments on areas ranging from the currency of the modules in each qualification through to how each qualification relates to external reference points such as National Qualifications Frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements and relevance to Professional and Statutory and Regulatory Bodies. Boards of Studies are also encouraged to

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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.

2 published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (www.qaa.ac.uk) and describes what can be expected of graduates in different subject areas.

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identify any features of each qualification such as its teaching and learning strategy which they would like to share with others.

6 Academic staff refer to a variety of information when completing the AQR report including: student registrations for each qualification and its compulsory and core modules; the number of students claiming qualifications and the time taken to complete the qualification; distribution of student classification for students that have completed qualifications; student pass rates; student demographics; student feedback captured via surveys such as the University’s Student Experience on a Module Survey and the National Student Survey.

7 Boards of Studies also consider an annual report submitted by their External Adviser. The External Adviser is asked to comment on:

- the currency and validity of the board of studies in comparison with comparable qualifications made by other institutions with reference to any benchmarks and professional requirements (where applicable);
- the appropriateness of the modules within each qualification and the structure of the qualification;
- the objectives of the qualification and how these are achieved through the individual modules within the qualification;
- the classification profiles of students who have achieved the qualification.

8 Boards of Studies monitor the external environment with particular regard to the recognition of qualifications by external bodies, the offerings of other higher education institutions in the subject area of the qualification, including student enrolments, and governmental policy. They keep under review the Qualification Specification of each qualification for which they are responsible, including the validity, relevance and lifespan of the qualification and its constituent strands and modules, recommending changes where appropriate. These activities, and actions arising, are reported in the AQR programme report.

9 Completed AQR reports are considered by an Institutional Scrutiny Group, which scrutinise the reports on behalf of the University’s Qualifications and Assessment Committee (in terms of academic standards) and the Student Experience Committee (in relation to the quality of the student experience). The outcomes from this scrutiny process can lead to changes in institutional processes and procedures and recommendations made to Boards of Studies for improving the student experience or for sharing best practice.

**Periodic Quality Review**

10 The University also carries out periodic reviews of all its qualifications whether delivered directly to its student body or through partnership. The review process is carried out over a 6-year cycle. The key features of this review activity are:

- peer review. A panel is appointed to undertake a review comprising two internal academic members of staff, an external academic and a representative from the University’ student body;
- review to a standard procedure and report template based on self-evaluation of the subject area.

11 The aims and objectives of the review process are to:

- address the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency external review framework;
- focus on student satisfaction, performance and achievement in qualifications (as distinct from modules);
• lead to quality enhancement through an independent critical evaluation of the curriculum and so make a positive contribution to quality assurance within the University;
• demonstrate the effective and ongoing management of the quality and standards of qualifications, the management of learning opportunities and the reliability of information.

12 The findings from periodic quality review are reported to the relevant Board of Studies and Teaching Committee (faculty body) and considered at institutional level by the Academic Quality & Governance Committee. The outcomes are published internally and discussed by the Directors of Teaching forum as a way of sharing best practice and learning from any recommendations for improvement. An action plan is prepared to address recommendations for improvement within 2-3 months of the review and a progress report on progress/completion of planned actions a year later. Recommendations may be directed to other parts of the University or at institutional level and these too are addressed in the action plan and progress report by relevant units.

Module level review

13 Modules are subject to annual monitoring, which is reported back to the University via the AQR report (detailed above). They are also subject to a more intensive review process twice during their lives (Stage Gate 5 module post launch review and module lifecycle review), and exception reporting if data indicates cause for concern or exceptional performance to share. These reviews and outcomes of the reviews are reported back to the University via the AQR process. The detail of each type of module review is given in more detail below.

14 **Module post launch review** (Stage 5 of the University’s Stage-Gate process)

After first presentation, post-launch review applies to both new and remake modules and fulfils the following functions:

• A business review to check whether the original market assumptions, strategic aims and the costing outlined at the previous stage-gates were reasonably accurate and whether actual performance justifies the continuation of the module or pack as planned.
• A quality assurance process using the initial feedback and performance data on the first presentation to evaluate the effectiveness of the module in fulfilling its learning outcomes (including workload) and retaining students. If any aspect of the process suggests that changes are needed, the review report should clearly outline the reasons for this to ensure that decisions on quality enhancement are properly informed.

15 **Module lifecycle review and/or before any proposal to extend or remake** (Stage 5 of the University’s Stage-Gate process)

Lifecycle review applies to all modules and packs and is normally held at a point in the module life when a decision needs to be made about the module life or whether to invest resource in updating the module. This stage combines:

• A business review to check whether the module is continuing to attract students, continues to deliver anticipated strategic fit, and is maintaining a reasonable level of contribution. Any proposal for changes to the module, including plans to update module materials should be fully costed and a financial assessment summary should be completed.
• A quality assurance check using evidence gathered during previous presentations to evaluate performance in relation to its academic currency, effectiveness in fulfilling its
learning outcomes (including workload) and student retention and performance. The outcome of this review will contribute to any proposals for changes to the module or to the planned life of the module.

Module Exception reporting

As part of the AQR process, Directors of Teaching may ask modules to carry out an exception review. The Institutional Scrutiny Group provides guidance as to criteria that can be used to identify modules for exception review, based on key performance indicators relating to module pass rates and student feedback responses in the end of module survey. Exception reporting covers modules where performance is weak and action is necessary, and also where performance is strong, in order to identify areas of good practice for dissemination.

Regular module review

Modules not completing one of the above reviews carry out a regular module review. This focuses on student retention, performance and completion, and student feedback. An example template form is provided, but faculties are free to adapt this to suit their own requirements.

Module life – The initial module life and presentation pattern is agreed at approval stage. The module life initially approved may subsequently be reviewed, or, under certain circumstances, the module may be withdrawn before the completion of its planned period of presentation. Curtailing the expected life of a module requires approval by the relevant faculty. The decision must only be taken after careful consideration of the options available to students who might have intended to study it as part of a qualification.

Extension of a module life – An extension to the life of a module is signalled as early as possible in the faculty’s annual forward module plans. An extension to the life of a module is considered by a module life review panel, convened by the faculty, and which submits a proposal to faculty committee on extending or shortening the agreed module life. Faculty committee, acting on behalf of the Senate, can accept or reject the proposal, seek further evidence or approve an extension with conditions e.g. make certain changes to the module. Module lives cannot be extended for more than four years in addition to the currently agreed life of a module. Subsequent module life reviews may result in further extensions of up to four years. A module with an ‘indefinite’ life is therefore subjected to a module life review during its sixth year of presentation, and at four yearly intervals thereafter.

Review of non-module or qualification based services to students

Services which are non module-specific are reviewed in various ways including:

At institutional level - The unit planning process incorporates elements of review against plans and targets. Unit Strategy Statements draw upon, and feed into the University’s strategic priorities, which is itself reviewed annually.

Unit internal review processes - Units with responsibilities for non-academic student services undertake their own internal reviews. Reports are focussed around key performance indicators which help identify where specific activity is needed.

Through module/programme review - The review process at module and qualification level involves consideration of the student experience, and the findings which relate to particular aspects e.g. module advice, tutorial support, computing support, timely and accurate provision of information and materials. Periodic Quality Review considers the role of Academic Services, Marketing, Library Services and Learning and Teaching Solutions in the
student learning experience. Aspects are also aggregated at activity level and considered by appropriate committees.

**Annual monitoring of curriculum partnerships & validated provision**

Annual review of curriculum partnerships and validated provision is considered by the Curriculum and Validation Committee (see Factsheet 5).

**Review and enhancement of research degrees**

Research degree standards are subject to rigorous approval processes at initial registration, degree registration and examination.

The Research Degrees Committee is responsible to the Research Committee for all policy, regulatory, and procedural matters relating to research degrees and higher doctorates. The responsibility to ensure that the process is satisfactorily completed rests with the Head of Discipline/Department. The review processes are designed to identify matters which may be causing issues for the student, the supervisors and the discipline, as well as assuring that a satisfactory standard of progress is being achieved. The Research Degrees Committee periodically reviews aspects of policy and procedure.

In addition the directly supported research degree programme has an annual programme monitoring process which reports to the Research Degrees Committee.

**Student Feedback via Module Survey**

The Student Experience on a Module (SEaM) Survey is the main instrument used to monitor and evaluate the student experience of teaching and learning on undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules in the University. The SEaM survey comprises three themed sets of questions which cover teaching, learning & assessment; feedback on your tutor; the module overall. Students are asked to answer a mix of closed and open questions. The University uses ten key performance indicator questions (where students are asked to rate an aspect of the overall module experience) to support module and qualification teams in identifying undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules which are performing particularly well and those that are not performing as well as expected. Key performance indicator summary data for the OU overall and by level is provided in addition to individual results for each module.

Full results are published internally on the University’s Student Statistics website, and data tables of the results of the key performance indicator questions for individual modules are also published on the Study at the OU website together with module team responses to any issues raised by students through the survey.

**Student Feedback via Qualification Surveys**

Students views on their experience studying a qualification(s) with the OU is given through external surveys, particularly the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) survey. The outcomes of the DLHE and NSS surveys are available from [www.unistats.com](http://www.unistats.com). This data is considered at qualification level as part of the AQR process.

**Internal student surveys**

University-wide issues such as the outcomes of university study for graduates, the costs of OU study and access to technology require special surveys at appropriate times. There is a main programme of internal surveys conducted at University-wide level e.g. student
withdrawal survey, early qualification experience survey, careers survey. These surveys are all seen by the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) before they are launched.