QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The content and links in this fact sheet are correct as of the date of last update shown. A full review of the factsheet series is planned in 2021.

FACT SHEET 2: FRAMEWORK FOR ACADEMIC QUALITY AND STANDARDS

The UK Quality Code

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has overseen the development of a UK Quality Code, which provides a national ‘quality framework’ for qualifications in UK higher education institutions. The UK Quality Code was first published in 2012 and revised in 2018. The revised Code was developed by the QAA on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) in consultation with the higher education sector. Its revision ensures that the Code continues to fulfil its role as a cornerstone for quality in UK higher education, protecting the public and student interest, and championing the UK higher education’s world-leading reputation for quality. The revised Code embodies the co-regulatory approach that underpins UK higher education (that is, reflects the requirements of higher education funding bodies in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland).

2 The UK Quality Code is used by higher education institutions/providers in tandem with other key external reference points such as subject benchmark statements, national qualification frameworks and credit frameworks outlined below. Together they provide a set of external reference points to help to ensure the academic quality and standards of higher education provision.

3 The revised Code is based on three elements:

- Expectations which express outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards (e.g. value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards), and for managing the quality of their provision (e.g. from admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education).

- Practices representing effective ways of working that underpin the delivery of expectations, and deliver outcomes for students. These include: ‘core’ practices (e.g. the provider designs and/or delivers high quality courses) that must be demonstrated by all UK higher education providers as part of assuring their standards and quality; and ‘common’ practices (e.g. the provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience) that will be applied by providers in line with their missions, their regulatory context and needs of their students. These are practices common to the underpinning of quality in all UK providers but are not regulatory requirements for providers in England.

---

1 Links to external and internal websites were checked May 2020. Some web links referred to in this document may be intranet based and so restricted to Open University staff.
• Advice and guidance which helps established and new providers alike to develop and maintain effective quality assurance practices. Advice and guidance is divided into twelve themes: admissions, recruitment & widening access; assessment; concerns, complaints & appeals; course design & development; enabling student achievement; external expertise; learning & teaching; monitoring & evaluation; partnerships; research degrees; student engagement; work-based learning.

4 A mapping of the Open University’s quality assurance policies and procedures against the ‘old’ Code is currently being updated against the Expectations, Practices and Advice and Guidance themes of the revised Code.

The Frameworks for Qualifications in Higher Education

5 The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (Qualifications Frameworks) is published by the QAA. The Qualification Frameworks set out the different levels of higher education qualifications and the requirements for each of these. There is one framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and a separate one for Scotland. Both are combined in one publication. The document is currently being updated to bring it in line with the revised Quality Code.

6 For England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the 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

7 For Scotland, it includes credit and qualification levels spanning its national qualifications from secondary school level upwards, its Higher National qualifications, HEI qualifications and Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

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

9 A Levels framework for the OU has been developed to provide a set of generic level indicators to support curriculum design, and teaching and learning development within the OU at undergraduate levels 0, 1, 2 and 3 (or FHEQ 4, 5 and 6) as well as Taught Postgraduate curriculum. 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 FHEQ. The University’s qualification approval process requires commentary on the use of external reference points including the FHEQ.

QAA Subject Benchmark Statements

10 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.
Qualification Specifications (definitive records)

11 Institutions are expected to maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) in line with the UK Quality Code\(^2\). At the Open University, Qualification Specifications 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

12 Qualification Specifications form the basis of information about a qualification published on the University’s courses website.

National Credit Frameworks

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

14 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.

15 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 [http://scqf.org.uk/]; 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.

16 The principles of 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).

17 The Open 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 modules are usually worth 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. Information on the credit size of provision is included on the courses website.

Qualification Approval

18 In the Open University a new undergraduate or taught postgraduate qualification proposal is evaluated using a qualification specification proforma which has been developed with

---

\(^2\) Principle 6 in course design and development advice and guidance theme
reference to the external reference points 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.

All new taught qualifications must secure institutional approval through the Qualifications and Assessment Committee. Each new qualification takes into account 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.

Boards of Studies, which manage the academic quality and standards of taught qualifications and modules, 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.

Recognition of Prior Learning Policy

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.

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.

Information for students is available on a Credit Transfer web page.

Module Approval

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.

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;

3 The Open University appoints external advisers (academics from other providers) to its Boards of Studies as part of its peer review arrangements. Their role is two-fold: to provide their direct experience of relevant standards in other Universities to enable comparison, and to provide external scrutiny of the University’s processes of awarding qualifications.
• the requirements of professional or statutory bodies, or other influences on academic standards;
• feedback on module presentation.

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.

Module Materials Development

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; 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.

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 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.

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 or senior lectureship level etc at another provider. 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. Working with module teams, Learning and Teaching Librarians advise on how these resources can be integrated into qualification/modules to match the chosen pedagogic approaches through providing direct links to materials or by encouraging their discovery and use in developing independent study skills. Co-developed by Library Services a digital and information literacy framework supports a consistent and structured approach to developing these skills through qualifications. Library Services include a programme of synchronous online training sessions to all OU students on subjects such as how to find information for an assignments and an introduction to reference management tools.

Qualification Regulations and Rules

Conditions of Registration and Academic 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 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.