

El Disseny i l'Avaluació de les Titulacions de Grau

How it happens in the United Kingdom

UK universities are autonomous institutions. They cannot award degrees without government approval, but once that power has been granted each university is individually responsible for maintaining standards and assuring quality. Nor do they require prior approval to introduce a new degree programme: we do not have a national accreditation system

Until the 1990s the chief guardians of academic standards in the UK were the **external examiners**. The 'external' is a subject expert from another university whose role is to ensure that the degree programme is of the right standard and comparable with that of other universities, and that the examination process is both rigorous and fair.

The external examiner system remains an essential part of the UK approach to quality assurance. However, because of the rapid expansion of the university sector and its increased cost for taxpayers, central government decided that something more was needed. New forms of monitoring were introduced and developed and these have been managed, since 1997, by the **Quality Assurance Agency**. The QAA is an independent body. It helps the Funding Councils, which direct public monies to the universities, to fulfil their statutory responsibility for ensuring that those funds are well used, but it is not a government department.

Three of the most important functions of the QAA are as follows:

1. If an institution is seeking **degree awarding powers** and/or a university title for the first time, the QAA provides advice to the government on whether these aspirations are justified. It does so by appointing a panel of experts to judge the case.
2. The QAA conducts **Institutional Audits**, on a six-year cycle, to examine the effectiveness of each university's internal quality assurance system. It does so by appointing a small team of experienced academics from other universities, who base their conclusions on documentary evidence, including a self-critical report prepared by the institution, and on meetings with staff and students conducted *in situ*. The team must decide whether it has "confidence" in the university's management of: *a)* academic standards; and *b)* the quality of learning opportunities available to students. Its report also highlights existing good practice and recommendations for future action. The process is somewhat different in Scotland where there is, for example, a more explicit emphasis on quality enhancement and on student involvement. Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (or 'ELIR') is how it is known in Scotland and each ELIR team includes a current student as a full member.
3. The QAA has developed a set of **national reference points** to help universities maintain standards and quality. These are:

- a) The *Qualifications Framework* is an outcomes-based structure that defines the relationship between level of achievement and title of award. It is intended to ensure consistency of nomenclature within the UK - so that prospective students and the general public know what a given award (eg 'BA' or 'MPhil') means - and to ensure compatibility with the Bologna Declaration. There are in fact two Frameworks, one for Scotland and one for the rest of the UK. Scotland has its own partly because its undergraduate degree structure differs in significant respects from that elsewhere in Britain but also because the Scottish framework for higher education is already part of a much more extensive, credit-based, framework that is designed to support lifelong learning.
- b) *Subject Benchmark Statements*. Individual benchmark statements have been drawn up for a wide range of academic disciplines. Each describes what gives the discipline its coherence and identity and what abilities and skills a graduate in that subject can be expected to have acquired. They do not constitute a national curriculum but are meant to assist those involved in programme design, delivery and review, and to be of help to prospective students and employers.
- c) The *Code of Practice*. This helps universities to discharge their responsibility for managing standards and quality by setting out good practice. Each of the 10 sections of the Code was compiled by an advisory group drawn from universities and other interested bodies.

Programme design, approval, monitoring and review

This is the title of Section 7 of the Code of Practice, which is particularly relevant to this workshop because it encapsulates the UK's approach to the design and evaluation of new degree programmes. It was revised last year (when I was a member of the advisory group) and can be found on the QAA website at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>

In common with all other parts of the Code, section 7 sets down a small number of precepts, each accompanied by a short commentary and explanation, that institutions should consider when developing and reviewing their own quality assurance procedures. The Code is not meant to be prescriptive but it is expected that the institution will meet the precepts by some means or other.

Section 7 defines 'programme' to mean an approved curriculum followed by a registered student, normally leading to a named award with specified learning outcomes. It begins with four 'General precepts'. These make it clear that the approval and review of programmes is a crucial element of quality assurance and that there must be external participation to guarantee independence and objectivity. Besides academic peers from other disciplines and universities, external advice may be sought from, for example, other professional bodies and from present and past students.

Good programme **design** is the initial key to successful delivery. Things to consider include: the institution's mission; the aims of the programme; its place in the Qualifications Framework and how it relates to relevant Subject Benchmarks; the overall coherence and balance of the programme; how intellectual progression is built into the curriculum; how the intended learning outcomes are promoted and assessed; how the programme is to be resourced; and the award title.

Programme **approval** should be finalised by an appropriate academic authority that is independent of those who would deliver the programme, and there should be a check to confirm that any conditions have been met. Matters to be considered include the anticipated demand for the programme and the length of time for which approval is to be granted.

Programme **monitoring** is the term used to describe routine checks to evaluate the programme's effectiveness and to remedy any shortcomings. Typically, this is an internal process, happening at the end of the academic year and informed by such evidence as external examiners' reports and student feedback.

Programme **review** is a more extensive undertaking, often carried out on a five-year cycle and always involving external participants, one function of which is to assess the cumulative effect on the programme's validity and relevance of what may have been minor, incremental changes.

The Code also emphasises that the needs of students and other interested parties should be fully taken into account before any programme is withdrawn or amended.

To summarise:

Although the UK does not have a national accreditation system, all universities must have quality assurance policies that include clear procedures for approving new programmes and reviewing them at regular intervals. These procedures should fulfil the precepts set out in the QAA's Code of Practice. In addition, every few years an external team, chosen and trained by the QAA, will conduct an Institutional Audit to assess the effectiveness of the university's internal arrangements.

It should also be mentioned here that many degree programmes are accredited at regular intervals, not by the government but by professional bodies such as the General Medical Council or the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Some examples from actual practice

Programme Approval

In my own university, proposals to introduce a new 'module' [the term used to denote the constituent parts of degree programmes, each module being self-contained and separately assessed and having its own credit rating], or to amend an existing programme in some other way, or to start an entire new programme must be submitted to the appropriate Faculty Business Committee (FBC), comprising the senior officers of that Faculty. There is a separate

form for each kind of proposal (ie new module; amendment; new programme) setting out the information that must be provided. For a new module the required information has primarily to do with how the module relates to existing ones and with the details of how it would be taught (eg frequency of lectures, tutorials, etc) and assessed (eg balance between coursework and examination). For a new programme, information must also be supplied about the rationale for the programme, the likely demand for places, the admissions process, sources of funding, the intended learning outcomes and the typical carers that graduates could be expected to follow. In some cases, the FBC may require a full business case to be presented. A new module must have the prior approval of a current external examiner. A new programme requires prior approval from an external specialist who is not a current or recent external examiner at the university. FBC passes its recommendations to the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee, where they can be discussed by staff and student representatives from across the university, before being passed to Academic Council/Senate for a final decision.

As the external member of the Academic Board at another Scottish institution I am currently chairing what they call a 'Scrutiny Panel', which is considering a proposal for a new taught postgraduate degree. For the Preliminary Scrutiny, the panel was provided with a Statement of Intent, summarising the perceived need for the programme and the evidence on which this was based. Supplementary documentation dealt with such matters as how the programme would map onto the Scottish Qualifications Framework and how it would be taught and assessed. The Scrutiny Panel also interviewed the principal advocates of the programme. Having done so we identified a number of concerns that needed to be addressed before the proposal could be brought back for a Full Scrutiny. When that happens, next month, we can: accept the proposal; agree to it with conditions; require its resubmission; or reject it altogether.

At a third institution, where I have recently been part of the Institutional Audit team reviewing its quality assurance procedures on behalf of the QAA, we were largely satisfied by its *Procedure for developing and approving new programmes of study* but nevertheless recommended two improvements. A recent proposal to introduce a new Masters programme had been reviewed by what is termed, at this institution, a Validation Committee but the formation of that committee had not been ratified, as it should have been, by the Academic Board. That was a departure from the institution's own policy. Our second recommendation was that the policy itself should be strengthened by including clear criteria that would establish the independence of the external members of the Validation Committee.

Programme Monitoring

The system we use at the University of St Andrews attracted favourable comment from the ELIR team that reviewed our quality assurance procedures last year. The university comprises 18 Schools, most of which represent a single academic discipline (such as Biology or History). Each School is required to produce an annual Academic Audit report which shows how students performed in all of its modules the previous year and draws upon external examiners' reports and feedback from student questionnaires and Student-Staff Consultative Committee meetings to evaluate the effectiveness of its teaching. The School is required to comment upon any

significant problems and encouraged to highlight any pedagogic innovations, especially ones that might be of interest to those teaching in other Schools. All that is more or less standard practice now at all Scottish universities. What probably impressed the ELIR reviewers were two additional features. 1) Because we are a relatively small university it is possible for our Academic Audit Committee to discuss each report with the Head of School face to face and in considerable depth; and 2) we identify a particular theme each year (eg the 'Employability' of graduates) as one that we wish to concentrate on in pursuance of the university's Quality Enhancement Strategy. A record is made of each interview for the School in question, and an overview produced which attempts to draw out general lessons and to disseminate good practice.

Programme Review

Here again the procedures we use at St Andrews are broadly similar to those followed by other Scottish universities. All credit-bearing learning and teaching is reviewed over a five-year cycle. Each review team includes two subject specialists from other universities (who are not current or recent external examiners at St Andrews) and at least one student from a different part of the university. Advance documentation supplied to the team, on a CD, includes recent external examiner reports, the minutes of the Student-Staff Consultative Committee and of the School's Teaching Committee, the programme specifications and other information supplied to students, previous review reports, and a Self-Evaluation by the School of its teaching produced especially for the review. The team then spends two full days in the School, interviewing students and staff, inspecting a sample of student work, and witnessing the learning environment at first hand. The team produces a report, stating whether or not it has confidence in the management of standards and quality, and highlighting features of good practice on the one hand and areas for improvement on the other. Consequential action is monitored by the university's Academic Audit Committee. At St Andrews we also use a similar procedure to review the operation of those university service units (such as the Library and the Careers Centre) that are most directly involved in supporting learning and teaching.

Outcomes from Institutional Audit

This is the title given by the QAA to a series of publications that seek to draw out general lessons for all universities from a survey of the individual audit reports. One of these is entitled *Validation and approval of new provision and its periodic review*.

It was published in January 2006 and may be found on the QAA website at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/ValidationandApproval.asp

The publication discusses, with examples, the way in which individual universities deal with the initial approval of new programmes (often referred to as 'validation'), how they utilise the national reference points, how they select and deploy external advice, variations between

universities in the balance between devolved authority and institutional oversight, and the way in which programmes are reviewed and re-validated periodically. It concludes as follows:

“The evidence of the 70 institutional audit reports published in 2003-04 is that validation, approval and periodic review processes are in general soundly designed and operating effectively. The reports also indicate that in developing their systems most institutions have paid close attention to the ...advice contained in Section 7 of the Code of Practice. Overall, it is apparent that validation, approval and periodic review are contributing significantly to institutions’ arrangements for establishing and maintaining quality and standards.”

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance within the European Higher Education Area

This 2007 report from the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) includes a section on *Approval, Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes and Awards* as part of its treatment of quality assurance at the level of individual institutions of higher education. The Guidelines for this section state that programmes should be well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, in order to secure their continuing relevance and currency. The quality assurance of programmes and awards is expected to include:

- development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes;
- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content;
- specific needs of different modes of delivery (eg full-time, part-time, distance-learning, e-learning) and types of higher education (eg academic, vocational, professional);
- availability of appropriate learning resources;
- formal programme approval processes by a body other than that teaching the programme;
- monitoring of the progress and achievements of students;
- regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members);
- regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations;
- participation of students in quality assurance activities.

The QAA’s *Outcomes* report, as well as my own experience as an auditor at several universities and other institutions for higher education in both Scotland and England, suggests that the UK meets these expectations in general but that in a matter as complex as this, and given the speed of change in the twenty-first century, there is always something new to be learned from practice elsewhere.

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Degree validation in the UK

British universities are autonomous

No national accreditation system

but

since 1997 the public interest
has been safeguarded by:

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
www.qaa.ac.uk

What the QAA does

- It provides national reference points:

- *Qualifications Frameworks*
- *Subject Benchmark Statements*
- *Code of Practice*

- It conducts *Institutional Audits*

Section 7 of the Code of Practice

*Programme design, approval,
monitoring and review*

Precepts + commentary

Must be clear procedures and external participation

Section 7 of the Code of Practice

[http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/
codeOfPractice/section7/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section7/default.asp)

- **Design** is the key to successful delivery
- **Approval** requires independence
& conditions must be met

- **Monitoring** regular and internal
- **Review** periodic and external

No national accreditation

but

- Universities must have QA procedures
- These should respect Code of Practice
- Institutional Audits check effectiveness

Outcomes from Audit

QAA publication based on 70 Institutional Audit reports

Validation and approval of new provision, and its periodic review

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/ValidationandApproval.asp>

Conclusions

- The UK approach to validation is effective
- Always something new to be learned