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QAA 066 10/2004

Recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements

November 2004

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ISBN 1 85824 211 7

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Preface

1 From November 2004, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) put into place a new set of arrangements for promoting the drafting and publication of additional subject benchmark statements. The arrangements also include procedures for revising existing benchmark statements. These new arrangements - the Recognition scheme - have been established in order to respond positively to an increasing number of requests from a range of subject communities for the Agency to support the development of, and/or endorse, new benchmark statements. The arrangements have been finalised following a widespread consultation on the draft criteria and guidelines for the scheme. The scheme is being developed and managed by the Agency's Steering Group for Benchmarking (see Annex A for the membership).

2 This document describes:

- the criteria against which the Steering Group will form a judgement on the appropriateness of supporting the development and recognition of a given new benchmark statements (the guidelines);
- the sequence of steps for receiving and processing a submission of a draft benchmark statement (the recognition process);
- the arrangements for the evaluation and revision of existing benchmark statements (the review process).

Introduction

Purpose of benchmarking

3 The development of subject benchmark statements was one of a set of linked recommendations of the *National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing) Report* of 1997. Together with the development of national qualification frameworks (developed as the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications), programme specifications, and a code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards, benchmarks were seen as a means of making more explicit the nature and level of academic standards in higher education and, in turn, providing a foundation for employers, public and others to have confidence in the academic awards of higher education institutions. The Agency was given the remit of putting in place these related proposals to provide the sector with a framework for the management of academic quality and standards, which has become known as the Academic Infrastructure.

The task of benchmarking

4 While the *Dearing Report* referred to the need to define and articulate 'threshold' standards, the Agency saw the need to develop further the task at hand. It did this through developing a brief for drafting benchmark statements; this provided a practical basis for benchmark groups to use as an indicative guide in their work.

5 With the initial focus being seen as the single subject honours degree, groups were steered towards drafting benchmarks having regard to the following needs:

- to make explicit the nature and standards of awards that carry the subject in their title;
- to acknowledge the difference and diversity of programmes within agreed limits set by the subject community itself;
- to ensure that benchmark statements provide variety and flexibility in the design of programmes and encourage innovation within an agreed conceptual framework;
- to explain the conceptual framework which gives the discipline its coherence and identity;
- to set out the attributes and capabilities expected of graduates, in order to represent the general expectations of standards in awards;
- to avoid producing a specification of a detailed curriculum or programme and to avoid prescribing approaches to teaching, learning and assessment;

- to establish a consensus within the academic community on the nature and standards of awards.

6 Benchmarking groups were initially briefed to articulate 'threshold' or minimum standards, but the majority have also sought to provide statements on 'typical' or modal standards and, in addition, a few sought to describe excellence.

7 Benchmarking groups were also given an indicative structure for drafting statements and most have used this in a flexible manner. The following structure was indicated:

- defining principles;
- nature and extent of the subject;
- subject knowledge, understanding and skills;
- teaching, learning and assessment;
- standards.

8 An important component of the benchmarking process has been wide consultation with the subject's constituencies as an integral part of developing and drafting statements.

The use of subject benchmarks

9 Subject benchmark statements provide academic staff and institutions with a point of reference in the design and development of degree programmes and a framework for specifying intended learning outcomes. It may be the case that more than one benchmark statement is relevant to a programme or that the programme legitimately lies outside the subject coverage of the benchmarks.

10 Subject benchmark statements are also one of a number of external sources of information that can be drawn upon for the purposes of both internal and external review, and for making judgements about threshold standards being met. They are used in conjunction with other relevant documentation to enable reviewers to come to a rounded judgement based on a broad range of evidence. This evidence may include relevant programme specifications, the associated documentation of the relevant professional and statutory regulatory bodies, the frameworks for higher education qualifications, and the institution's own self evaluation documentation. The statements also provide professional and statutory bodies with academic and practitioner standards expected of graduates.

11 Subject benchmarks provide an immediate starting point for discussion and reflection within teaching teams and between teaching teams and reviewers. It is appreciated, however, that it may take some time for institutions to take into account newly published benchmark statements through their internal processes of periodic review.

Benchmarking: work to date

12 The Agency has facilitated the processes of drafting, consultation and publication for 64 subject benchmark statements. These have been produced in a sequence of overlapping phases and financially underpinned by specific contracts with the higher education funding bodies in the UK and Departments of Health (formerly the NHS) in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

13 Benchmark statements begin from the premise that they are UK-wide in application. Where, as in Scotland, there are some differences in the qualification arrangements, and also in professional and statutory regulations, separate benchmarks have been drafted and published as appropriate.

14 The Agency has also undertaken some benchmarking of masters level awards where it was regarded as appropriate - for example, business and management, engineering, and pharmacy. The Agency has acknowledged that with respect to the published benchmarks for dentistry, medicine and veterinary science, the standards for professional/employer skills and abilities align with the qualification descriptor for masters level awards.

15 A full list of published statements is at Annex A.

The Recognition scheme

16 The Agency has recognised the need to extend its current work on benchmarking in order to respond to subject areas that are not covered within the current published statements. The Agency will, through the Steering Group, recognise the authority of statements through their formal publication. The Recognition scheme will enable the Agency to:

- embrace subjects that lie outside the initial grouping of statements;
- involve new discipline areas;
- respond to subject communities that have already begun to prepare statements in their subject areas;
- formally recognise these, when appropriate.

17 The Recognition scheme will, in the first instance, embrace honours level awards. The Steering Group is considering further possible arrangements for developing statements at other levels in the frameworks for higher education qualifications. If there are any proposals to extend the Recognition scheme to other qualification levels, the Agency will consult widely with the sector.

18 The Recognition scheme is UK-wide. However, where future statements are specific to the higher education sector in Scotland, these proposals will be handled by the Agency's Scottish Office and will be subject to separate consultation with higher education institutions in Scotland.

19 The Recognition scheme draws on the principles and criteria developed by the Agency during the early work on benchmarking, and takes into account comments received from its consultation on the Recognition scheme. The main comments that needed to be addressed from the consultation were:

- the need to manage effectively the potential proliferation of subject statements;
- issues of subject identity, sufficiency and representation;
- the need to distinguish between established and emerging subjects.

20 The principles and guidelines have been revised with the aim of making the Recognition scheme more inclusive and overarching in nature. It will allow for both the development of new statements and the incorporation of new elements within existing subject categories, through their review. To help it come to a decision on whether to commission a new statement or the review of an existing one, the Steering Group will consult related cognate bodies for a view on whether the proposed subject has sufficiency and distinctiveness in terms of a shared conceptual framework so that it can be regarded as a separate subject for the purpose of benchmarking. A key principle of this process is openness so that all interested parties are aware of the initiative and have the capacity to be involved.

Guidelines for the consideration of applications to the Recognition scheme

21 The Steering Group for Benchmarking will form a judgement on the appropriateness of supporting and recognising a new benchmark on the basis of evidence against the following criteria:

- i that the subject has sufficiency and a distinct subject community;
- ii that the proposal is representative of the whole subject community and the views of associated disciplines;
- iii the extent to which existing statements are insufficient;
- iv the extent to which a new statement is necessary.

22 A decision may be made to support a new statement or to incorporate the subject within an existing subject category by initiating its review.

The subject has sufficiency and a distinctive subject community

23 Proposals need to demonstrate that a distinctive subject community exists for the proposed new statement and that the subject has a shared conceptual framework, and sufficiency and distinctiveness to merit a separate statement. Proposals should seek the views and support from related cognate subject bodies for a separate subject statement or for the incorporation of the subject within existing statements.

The proposal is representative of the whole subject community

24 The proposal will need to explain the basis on which it has a legitimate claim to represent and have the backing of the subject community in proposing the case for developing the statement. The proposal will need to provide evidence that there has been consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant subject bodies, for example, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

The extent to which existing statements are insufficient

25 The proposal will need to demonstrate that existing statements are insufficient to serve the needs of the subject community. The principal reasons for this would be because:

- i the subject does not share the conceptual frameworks of existing statements;
- ii a number of statements are only partly relevant, or of limited relevance, such that the translation of academic standards to the subject would, in effect, result in a separate statement;
- iii. accommodation of the subject cannot be achieved by the review and revision of an existing statement.

The extent to which a subject statement is necessary

26 The proposal will need to demonstrate that a new or revised statement would provide the benefits of a wider understanding about the scope and nature of the subject and the academic standards underpinning it. This could be desirable for one or more of the following reasons:

- i the subject is growing and more degree programmes are being provided in it;
- ii a degree in the subject may be required for entry into a profession, but there are no explicit academic standards associated with the subject for this purpose. There may also be a lack of understanding within the relevant profession of what level of attainment can be expected of a graduate in the subject, or of its appropriateness for entry into the profession;
- iii the prospective benefits of agreed and explicit standards in the relevant subject have been highlighted by, for example, external examiners and validating boards, institutions or subject groups or stakeholder organisations;
- iv it will help identify substantial emergent disciplines and help to clarify the meaning of degree titles.

The recognition process

27 The process for achieving recognition will proceed along the following six steps.

Step 1

The Agency and the Steering Group is notified by a relevant subject body of its interest in developing a new or revising an existing subject benchmark statement. This expression of interest would be announced on the Agency's web site in order to ensure that the wider subject community is kept informed and is able to be represented and involved in the process.

Step 2

The Steering Group will consider formal proposals for subject benchmark statements through evidence against the four headings set out in paragraphs 23 to 26 above. Submissions will need to demonstrate consultation not only with the defined subject community for its support in developing a benchmark but also with appropriate related areas. As well as providing information for the four areas, submissions will also need to provide information about:

- i the number and types of providers and degree courses in the subject, and known current undergraduate student numbers across the UK;
- ii the titles of award to be covered by the statement;
- iii where relevant, arrangements for student progression to professional status and arrangements for accreditation and exemption from professional examinations.

Proposals will need to demonstrate how a new statement contributes to the existing subject framework for benchmarking, and how it relates to other statements, for example, that the subject is frequently offered either jointly or in a combined degree programme with another subject covered by an existing statement, or that the new statement provides a more complete subject coverage in a wider subject field.

Step 3

The Steering Group will request the views of cognate bodies, if this has not already been undertaken as part of the submission, on whether the proposal can be incorporated within existing statements through review or whether a new statement should be developed. This consultation process will be announced on the Agency's web site.

Step 4

The Steering Group will then decide whether to commission the review of an existing statement or whether to support the development of a new statement. The decision will be hosted on the Agency's web site in case

there are other subjects interested in being incorporated in the review of existing statements. It will take between three and six months for the process to reach this stage. In cases where a decision has been made not to proceed, but the subject community is not happy with the decision, then the Steering Group will allow proposals to be resubmitted for reconsideration after an interval of at least two years.

Step 5

The next step is the development of a new statement or the revision of an existing statement to incorporate the new subject area. The process will need to be consistent with the principles and working brief adopted for the main benchmarking project as summarised in the section above on the task of benchmarking. These principles include gaining the support of all the representative bodies in the constitution of the drafting group and taking account of balances such as countries, types of institutions and different types of programme delivery, gender and subject specialisms in the membership of the group. The drafting group will need to consult widely with the subject community and the subject's stakeholders so that the statement and standards are acceptable to them and are fit for purpose.

Step 6

The Steering Group will consider and then make a decision whether to recognise the completed statement for publication. The Steering Group will need to be satisfied that the drafting process has been representative of the subject community and that the consultation process has been properly conducted. The Steering Group will need to be satisfied that there is congruence between the qualification descriptor and the academic standards described in the proposed subject benchmark statement. It is anticipated that it will normally take around twelve months to develop the statement to the point of publication.

Funding

28 The Agency has some funds to support subject benchmark groups in the drafting of new or revised statements. Funding will cover travel costs and expenses for attendance at meetings, meeting costs, consultation arrangements, and stationery and printing costs. The Agency may not have sufficient funds to support the development of all the proposals that the Steering Group would like to support, and therefore some prioritisation of funding may have to take place. Where a statement is approved by the Steering Group for publication, then the Agency will meet the publication costs in full.

The submission process

29 Notification and formal submissions to the Steering Group should be addressed to: The Project Manager for Benchmarking Academic Standards,

Development and Enhancement Group, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB. The Steering Group meets three times a year and it is recommended that the Project Manager is contacted for details about deadlines for submissions. Details will also be available from the Agency's web site at www.qaa.ac.uk

Publication arrangements

30 The publication of recognised subject benchmark statements will be the responsibility of the Agency. They will be available via the Agency's web site and also through the Agency's distributors Linney Direct (contact details and order form can be found on the Agency's web site).

The review of published benchmark statements

31 The review of published statements may be initiated by the decision of the Steering Group to incorporate a subject within an existing statement through the recognition process or through the regular cycle of review. The review process is guided by the following principles:

- i the Recognition scheme should be able to prompt the review of statements in order to allow existing statements to accommodate new subjects;
- ii the review process should allow for the generation of new statements;
- iii review does not necessarily require amendment and revision of the statement by the subject body;
- iv there should, where possible, be alignment of the review with curriculum/accreditation documents produced by cognate bodies;
- v the process will be based on peer review.

32 Subject benchmark statements will normally be reviewed on a regular five-year cycle after publication, though they could exceptionally be reviewed outside this cycle where, for example, there have been changes in curriculum or accreditation arrangements brought about by the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The Agency will invite the subject association(s) that took the lead and liaised with other bodies in establishing the membership of the original benchmarking group to coordinate a single response on the required level of revision for the subject statement. A shared view on whether subject driven revision is necessary will be sought. It may also be appropriate to consult other groups and bodies such as the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The view of the subject community may be that the existing benchmark statement does not require revision.

33 There are three possible stages to the review process: firstly, an initial evaluation by the Agency for the Steering Group in terms of its requirements for revision; secondly, consultation with the subject community via its subject association(s) on the need and extent of subject level revision; and thirdly, the constitution of a drafting group to undertake the revision.

34 Three levels of revision are possible and the decision on the appropriate level will be made by the Steering Group after consultation with the subject community.

i Minimal revision

The first and default level of revision will be initiated by the Agency. This takes the form of feedback and guidance from the Agency's own evaluation work with regard to the structure, content and vocabulary

of statements. This guidance is not about the subject content of the statement per se. If this were the only revision that was carried out, then the subject association taking the lead would be asked to form a small working group to ensure that the integrity of the subject element of the statement was maintained. It is not envisaged that the revised statement would need to go out to full consultation with the subject community. This form of revision would also be an additional requirement for both the following two levels of subject-based revision.

ii Minor revision

The second level, minor subject revision, would be recommended by the subject body. It would cover recommendations such as accuracy, readability and clarification. It should be possible to make these modifications, along with any modifications recommended by the Agency, through a small drafting group. As it is not a major rewriting exercise when it comes to the approval of the revised statement, the subject association, rather than the whole subject community, will be consulted.

iii Major revision

The third level, major subject revision, is where the subject association recommends more substantial review and revision. This would require the formation of a subject benchmarking group and consultation with the wider subject community and stakeholders on the proposed redraft. The group would also be required to take account of the Agency's analysis and guidance for revision as in the first level.

35 The review of the subject benchmark statements for Phase 1 of the main project will commence in April 2005 and Phase 2 in March 2007. It is envisaged that the whole review process will take no longer than 18 months.

Future work

36 The Agency is committed to evaluating and revising existing statements to reflect developments in subjects and the experience of academic staff and institutions in working with the statements. The Agency is undertaking evaluation work on how statements are being used and monitoring its review reports to see how they are being used by institutions and reviewers. The evaluation work also includes a study of the compatibility between some subject benchmark statements and equivalent European Tuning competency statements. The Agency is interested to hear about evaluation work undertaken by others and welcomes opportunities to collaborate.

Annex A: Membership of the Steering Group for Benchmarking

Chairman

Professor David Eastwood, University of East Anglia

Academic members

Professor Janet Beer, Arts and Humanities, The Manchester Metropolitan University

Professor David Bonner, Engineering and Technology, University of Hertfordshire

Professor Paul Brain, Biosciences, University of Wales Swansea

Professor David Buss, Art and Design, Kent Institute of Art and Design

Dr Sara Delamont, Social Studies, Cardiff University

Professor Chris Greensted, Business Administration, University of Plymouth

Professor Bob Munn, Physical Sciences, The University of Manchester

Professor Mike Pittilo, Health Studies, University of Hertfordshire

Professor Nigel Reeves, Languages, Aston University

Professor Sue Thornham, Communication Studies, University of Sussex

Professor Gillian Tucker, Music, Napier University

Professor Simon van Heyningen, Medicine, University of Edinburgh

Professional member

Dr Rita Gardner, Royal Geographical Society

Annex B: List of published subject benchmark statements

Honours level

Accounting	General business and management
Agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences and consumer sciences	Geography
Anthropology	Health studies
Archaeology	History
Architecture, architectural technology and landscape architecture	History of art, architecture and design
Area studies	Hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism
Art and design	Languages and related studies
Biomedical science	Law
Biosciences	Librarianship and information management
Building and surveying	Linguistics
Chemistry	Materials
Classics and ancient history	Mathematics, statistics and operational research
Communication, media, film and cultural studies	Medicine
Computing	Music
Dance, drama and performance	Optometry
Dentistry	Philosophy
Earth sciences, environmental sciences and environmental studies	Physics, astronomy and astrophysics
Economics	Politics and international relations
Education studies	Psychology
Engineering	Social policy and administration and social work
English	Sociology
	Theology and religious studies

Town and country planning

Veterinary science

Welsh/Cymraeg

Masters level

Business and management

MEng degrees: Annex to the
Engineering benchmark

Pharmacy

Healthcare programmes

Arts therapy

Audiology [pending]

Clinical psychology

Clinical science

Dietetics

Health visiting

Midwifery

Nursing

Occupational therapy

Operating department practice

Orthoptics

Paramedic science

Physiotherapy

Podiatry (chiroprody)

Professions complementary to
dentistry [pending]

Prosthetics and orthotics

Radiography

Speech and language therapy

Scottish subject benchmark statements

Joint publications with NHS
Scotland and the Scottish Executive
(November 2002) in:

- Health visiting
- Midwifery
- Nursing

The Standard for Initial Teacher
Education in Scotland (October
2000). Published jointly with the
General Teaching Council for
Scotland and the Scottish Executive.

The Standards in Social Work
Education in Scotland (January
2003). Joint publication with
COSLA, the Scottish Social Services
Council and the Scottish Executive
(NB published as part of a larger
document - The Framework for
Social Work Education in Scotland)