

University of Birmingham

**The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in
England, Wales and Northern Ireland: August 2008**

Topic and Purpose of this Report

1. The draft document, *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), which was discussed by APRC at its meeting on 22 May 2008 (APRC.08.05.08), was finalised by Quality Assurance Agency in August 2008. The full text of the document is available from the QAA website at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/FHEQ08.pdf>

2. For APRC to **consider** this finalised QAA Guidance document, paying particular attention to the implications for further action, and especially those that may be relevant to the forthcoming institutional audit.

Background and Context

3. The second draft for consultation of this Guidance was published by the QAA in April 2008 and the above-mentioned report to APRC outlined the review process, summarised the main features of the FHEQ and set out a number of issues for consideration. Responses were to be forwarded to the QAA in early June and members were requested to send any comments via Chris Twine.
4. Having now received the finalised Guidance from the QAA, this report summarises the QAA's proposals, identifies any developments arising from the consultation process and sets out the implications for the University arising from the Guidance document.

Summary of the FHEQ

5. The premise of the FHEQ is that, rather than being awarded on the basis of years of study, qualifications should be awarded on the basis of outcomes and attainment, with qualification descriptors setting out the generic outcomes and the attributes expected for the award of qualifications being paramount. It is applicable to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates) granted by higher education providers in the exercise of their degree awarding powers.
6. The FHEQ assists in the maintenance of academic standards by informing international comparability and ensuring competitiveness. The QAA have pointed out that the FHEQ will be accounted for during institutional audit and other forms of external review, with audit/review teams examining the steps

taken to ensure that awards and qualifications are at least consistent with those referred to in the FHEQ, via the alignment between award academic standards and the levels referred to in the FHEQ, and the degree awarding powers are exercised in a proper manner.

7. The QAA stipulated that institutions should be able to demonstrate that all students commencing programmes after the start of the 2003/04 academic year would, upon successful completion, have gained qualifications awarded in accordance with the FHEQ.
8. The revision process was led by a working group of representatives from providers and other interested organisations, to take account of the European and international context, comply with the Bologna declaration, and align with the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FEHEA). Account was also taken of the Burgess Group's proposals, the discussions of the QAA's masters level benchmarking group and the QAA's consultation on doctoral level programmes. However, the QAA maintains that the revisions and updates for the 2008 edition are not such as to make significant changes to provider's programmes in order that alignment may be achieved.
9. The main purposes of the FHEQ are to:
 - Provide important points of reference for setting and assessing academic standards to providers, external examiners, QAA auditors and reviewers.
 - Enable providers to communicate to stakeholders the achievements and attributes represented by the main higher education qualification titles.
 - Assist in the identification of potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning.
 - Promote a shared and common understanding of the expectations associated with main award titles by facilitating a consistent use of qualification titles across the higher education sector.

The FHEQ has the flexibility to accommodate diversity and innovation, and to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises.

10. Increasingly, Higher Education institutions, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The frameworks for higher education qualifications throughout the UK are designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration and align with *The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FQ-EHEA). In considering the appropriate level of the FQ-EHEA for a qualification, providers should consider:
 - The relationship between intended programme outcomes and the expectations set out in the qualification descriptors.
 - Whether there is a sufficient volume of assessed study that demonstrates the achievement of learning outcomes.
 - Whether the design of the curriculum and assessments is such that all students have the opportunity to achieve/demonstrate the intended outcomes.

Revisions to the Draft Guidance

11. In addition to the existing text of the draft guidance document, which was summarised at APRC's meeting in May, the following amendments and additions have been identified and, therefore, are brought to APRC's attention:
- **Paragraph 24:** When designing and approving programmes, higher education providers will wish to ensure that a coherent learning experience is delivered and that due consideration is given to the precept and explanatory text relating to programme design in the *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*. In addition, higher education providers will wish to take account of the regulatory and other requirements of the PSRBs (Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies) which accredit specific professional programmes.
 - **Paragraph 25:** Not all higher education qualifications will meet the qualification descriptors in full. For example, table 1 lists the typical higher education qualifications at each level but not all of the qualifications at each level will meet all of the expectations of the qualification descriptor. The qualifications are differentiated by the volume of learning and this in turn leads to variation in the range of intended learning outcomes. Some qualifications (for instance Foundation Degrees) have been specifically designed to facilitate progression to subsequent levels. Section 4 provides further information about the qualification descriptor for each level of the framework and gives examples of qualifications that meet each descriptor in full, and where the qualification descriptor can be used as a reference point for other qualifications at the same level.
 - **Paragraph 31:** At most levels there may be more than one type of qualification which can be achieved. Short programmes are often offered as continuing professional development opportunities. The qualification descriptors provide points of reference that will help institutions determine at which level of the FHEQ any qualifications resulting from such programmes should be placed. The guidance on naming qualifications (paragraphs 65-75) may be used to determine an appropriate title. A range of qualifications are encompassed by each level of the FHEQ. Each level is deliberately broad to provide flexibility and space for the development of new qualifications, for example, occupationally-related awards.
 - **Paragraph 32:** QAA will keep under review the need for any additional qualification descriptors, or amendment to them, in the light of the development of other points of reference, such as benchmark statements or European developments, for example arising from the Bologna Process.

Implementation Issues for Consideration

12. As a qualifications framework, the FHEQ is based upon the outcomes represented by the main qualifications titles; it is not a credit framework, nor is it dependent on the use of credit. However, credit is widely used by providers and, in England, the 'Burgess Group' published recommendations on national arrangements for the use of academic credit in higher education and the

subsequent Credit Issues Development Group has provided guidance on the implementation of these recommendations.

Therefore, providers need to demonstrate how the design of curricula facilitates academic and intellectual progression but, as it is not the purpose of the FHEQ to prescribe the internal organisation of academic programmes, there is no assumption that internal progression should be demonstrated by reference to the descriptors of outcomes of intermediate qualifications not necessarily used by the institution.

13. The QAA have, under the headings of 'Naming Qualifications' and 'Awarding Qualifications', identified matters that providers should be able to demonstrate are being addressed effectively through quality assurance mechanisms:

14. Naming Qualifications: Level and Nature

- The title of any qualification accurately reflects the level of achievements, represents appropriately the nature and field(s) of study undertaken, and is not misleading. Therefore, clarity in the use of qualification titles is required.
- To ensure that the name given to any qualification within the FHEQ appropriately reflects its level, such clarity assisting the promotion of public understanding of the achievements represented by HE qualifications:
 - The titles 'Honours' (e.g. Bachelors Degree with Honours), 'Master' (e.g. Master of Arts) and 'Doctor' (e.g. Doctor of Philosophy) should be used only for qualifications that meet, in full, the expectations of the qualification descriptors at levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively.
 - Titles with the stem 'Postgraduate' (e.g. Postgraduate Diploma) should be restricted to qualifications where the programme learning outcomes match relevant parts of the qualification descriptor at level 7 or above.
 - Titles with the stem 'Graduate' (e.g. Graduate Diploma) should be used for qualifications where the programme learning outcomes match relevant parts of the qualification descriptor at level 6.
- Programmes leading to a graduate certificate/diploma might have some level 7 outcomes, but use of the 'Postgraduate' title would only be justified if most or all of the outcomes were assessed at level 7.
- A qualification from a short, non-degree programme, having outcomes corresponding to some aspects of a qualification descriptor, might be placed at the same level as the main qualification to which the descriptor refers.
- The titles Foundation Degree, bachelors degree with honours, masters degree and doctoral degree should be used only in respect of qualifications at levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 respectively, which are awarded for achievement in full of the outcomes set out in the relevant qualification descriptor. For Foundation Degrees, at level 5, the qualification should also meet the expectation of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*.
- The titles 'PhD' and 'DPhil' should be restricted to qualifications assessed solely by final thesis/published work; or by artefact or performance, accompanied by a written commentary placing it in its academic context.
- The title 'MPhil' should normally be reserved for qualifications awarded following extended masters courses typically involving a substantial research element or equivalent enquiry.

- When used with the stems 'Graduate' or 'Postgraduate', the title 'Certificate' to signify study equivalent to at least one-third of an academic year; the title 'Diploma' signifying equivalence to at least two-thirds of an academic year.
- The title for doctoral degrees awarded for programmes with a substantial taught element should normally include the name of the discipline in the title (e.g. EdD for Doctor of Education).
- Qualification titles reflecting study in two disciplines (where study in more than three disciplines, the title 'Combined Studies is to be used) to be in the form:
 - 'A and B' where there is an equal balance (e.g. Joint Honours Award).
 - 'A with B' for a major/minor combination, the minor being at least a quarter of the programme.

15. Awarding Qualifications

- Qualifications are awarded to mark the achievement of positively defined outcomes, not as compensation for failure at a higher level, or by default. Failure at a higher level does not mean that a lower qualification cannot be awarded, but where a student has not demonstrated the outcomes set out in the qualification descriptor, a lower qualification should only be awarded if the student has met the outcomes required for the lower qualification.
- Providers should ensure that:
 - The outcomes required for each qualification are specified clearly.
 - Achievement of those outcomes has to be demonstrated before a qualification is awarded.
 - Assessment procedures that permit compensation/condonation are not applied in a way that might allow a qualification to be awarded without achievement of the full outcomes being demonstrated.

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