

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING PROGRAMME SPECIFICATIONS

Background and Rationale

1. Programme specifications arose from the Dearing Report to meet the perceived need for clear and explicit information about the knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, subject-specific skills and key transferable skills outcomes that programmes developed; about the 'stopping-off' points in programmes; about the teaching, learning and assessment methods employed; about the relationship of programmes to the national qualifications framework.
2. The University has been using programme specifications since they were proposed by Dearing (see *Graduate Standards and Programme Specification Requirements: Procedures for Programme Specification and Design, 1998*). We have employed a fairly standard template design as opposed to free text in order to ensure a 'house style' and to facilitate easy comparison and use of programme specifications for a range of purposes. They are intended to be of use to students and potential students, to employers, to professional and statutory bodies, to institutions and teaching teams, to academic reviewers and external examiners.
3. The recommended range of programmes for which specifications should be developed is: single, major and joint subject programmes, interdisciplinary programmes and multidisciplinary programmes. Specifications can be produced for taught programmes at any level of the HE qualifications framework (see *Guidelines for Preparing Programme Specifications, QAA, 2000*).
4. The recommended content of programme specifications is largely being met by those presented as part of programme validation and modification events. However it is the case that the QAA Guidelines and the example specifications they contain both suggest that further information could be incorporated within our own specifications and that greater clarity might be achieved thereby in linking the various dimensions of a programme and in the expression of the intended outcomes and structure of programmes. This will in turn encourage programme teams and internal panels to bring programme specifications more fully 'centre-stage' in validation and review events.
5. In considering the case for requiring further information to be included in programme specifications, cognisance is also being taken of the demands of internal programme validation/review panels and QAA subject review teams, which now commonly ask for more explicit descriptions, for example, of how the intended learning outcomes of programmes are met by the modules of which these programmes are comprised. A similar requirement is often made in relation to the way in which key skills are taught, developed and assessed. In addition, whilst programme specifications are now routinely included as part of validation documentation, further descriptions of programme structure and content are often provided alongside them which unnecessarily duplicate the

information actually (or potentially) available in the specification itself. Finally, a great deal of the administrative information needed to create module and programme records already exists within our programme specifications. With minor embellishments to the latter we will obviate the need for the separate listings of modules currently demanded of programme teams for administrative purposes.

6. The intention, therefore, is to seek to render programme specifications more comprehensive by assimilating within them in a standardised format much of the additional information already presented and/or sought through internal and external scrutiny, thus reducing the effort expended by programme teams (in producing different documents for supposedly different purposes) and by internal and external assessors and other audiences (in trying to understand and compare the different programmes).
7. One potential criticism of this approach, which has also been levelled at the concept of programme specifications itself, is that in trying to serve a number of purposes for a variety of audiences programme specifications have become less than useful to any of them. Indeed, some institutions have developed different versions of programme specifications for employers, students, UCAS, etc derived from the fuller description used as a design tool and for internal validation and external scrutiny purposes. Conversely, some institutions link their web-based programme specifications to electronic module descriptions and guides so that the reader can find more detailed information if required. The University currently extracts some of the information from programme specifications for the prospectus and for UCAS and is now demanding the publication of full, on-line specifications within the Programme Handbook, with the potential for including links from and to other pages.
8. Meanwhile, the proposal is that we continue to develop programme specifications in the ways outlined above and exemplified in the attached specimens, on the grounds that before we think about whether to summarise the information in different ways for different audiences, we need to be in possession of the fuller information in the first place. It has also been argued that to present it more comprehensively and in a standard way will reduce and facilitate the efforts of those involved in preparing and assessing the programme specifications themselves and the programmes they describe. This should lead to more efficient and effective processes overall.

Specific Requirements

9. Information to be included in a programme specification

It is suggested that we follow the recommended content as per the QAA Guidelines, i.e.

Preamble

1. awarding body/institution;
2. teaching institution (if different);
3. details of accreditation by a professional/statutory body;
4. name of the final award;

5. programme title;
6. UCAS code (if relevant) and Academic Programme Code;
7. aims of the programme;
8. relevant subject benchmark statements and other external and internal reference points used to inform programme outcomes;
9. programme outcomes: knowledge and understanding; cognitive skills; subject-specific and practical skills; other attributes including key transferable skills;
10. teaching, learning and assessment strategies to enable outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated;
11. curriculum map of programme structures and requirements, modes, levels, modules, cores/options/prerequisites, credit, interim and final awards; incorporate curriculum outcomes map, curriculum skills map and curriculum assessment map;
12. particular support for learning;
13. criteria for admission to the programme;
14. methods for evaluating and improving the quality and standards of learning;
15. information about assessment regulations;
16. indicators of quality and standards;
17. guide to additional information.
18. date on which programme specification was written or revised.

10. **Issues for consideration in preparing programme specifications**

The QAA Guidelines contain useful pointers for academic staff in writing programme specifications; these are attached to these guidelines.

11. **Format of Programme Specifications**

As noted in section 2 above, the basic format we have adopted is a standard one which writers can develop and expand to include additional information and to accommodate different and more useful ways of presenting existing information. What follows are some examples taken from the QAA Guidelines which illustrate a range of possibilities.

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