



Overview of the role *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, subject benchmark statements, and programme specifications play in setting and maintaining academic standards: findings from *Outcomes from institutional audit* papers

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) publishes *Outcomes from institutional audit* (*Outcomes...*) papers in order to provide institutions, their staff and students, and other stakeholders in higher education with information about the emerging broad findings of audit and review activity. The first series of *Outcomes...* drew on the findings of the audit reports for institutions in England and Northern Ireland published between 2003 and November 2004. The second series uses evidence from the 59 audit reports published between December 2004 and August 2006. This overview concerns the publication of three papers in the second series: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ); *Subject benchmark statements*; and *Programme specifications*.

QAA worked with the UK higher education sector to develop a series of reference tools which would help institutions set and maintain the quality and academic standards of their awards in response to proposals made by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997; otherwise known as the Dearing and Garrick reports). These tools comprised qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and a *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*) and later became known collectively as the Academic Infrastructure. The Academic Infrastructure is now maintained by QAA on behalf of the sector, and is regularly reviewed and revised as necessary.

The Academic Infrastructure is designed to give all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality of their higher education provision, and the standards of their degrees and other higher education awards. Higher education institutions in the UK are independent, autonomous organisations, with their own legal identities and powers, both academic and managerial. They are free to offer such programmes and awards as they wish, subject to the status of their awarding powers. There is no national curriculum for higher education. The Academic Infrastructure helps to ensure that the degrees of different institutions across the UK are broadly comparable while allowing for diversity and innovation.

The four elements of the Academic Infrastructure are interrelated. Three components are mainly concerned with setting standards, and one (the *Code of practice*) is concerned with the management of quality. The three components concerned with setting standards relate general national expectations about higher education courses and qualifications with those of individual subjects, and also provide a clear description of what each study programme includes and expects.

- The frameworks for higher education qualifications set out general expectations about what the main UK degrees and other higher education awards represent in terms of the knowledge, understanding and abilities that graduates should possess and the level of achievement represented by the qualification.

- Subject benchmark statements have been developed in conjunction with subject communities and describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in that subject area in terms of knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities.
- Programme specifications are written by each institution and set out the details of the particular programmes offered, in terms of their intended learning outcomes and the means by which these will be achieved and demonstrated.

The fourth element of the Academic Infrastructure, the *Code of practice*, has 10 sections. Each covers a different topic of basic importance and includes a series of principles (called 'precepts') that set out key matters to be covered by quality management in higher education.

Each higher education awarding body is responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are being achieved and for providing learning opportunities that are appropriate to the award. They do this by regularly assessing systems and programmes to ensure that they are fit for purpose, on an annual basis and via longer term periodic reviews. QAA carries out external reviews to judge how reliably the universities and higher education colleges fulfil their responsibilities, and the Academic Infrastructure is used as a reference point when reviewing the effectiveness of institutions' management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The Institutional audit and review processes do not seek evidence of compliance with the guidance contained in the Academic Infrastructure, but rather evidence that the institution has considered the purpose of the reference points, has reflected on its own practices in the relevant areas, and has taken, or is taking, any necessary steps to ensure that appropriate changes are being introduced.

The Institutional audit method deployed by QAA for institutions in England and Northern Ireland from 2002 was the first of its institution-level audit and review methods to be able to draw on the Academic Infrastructure as an external and agreed set of reference points. Papers in the first series of *Outcomes...* discussed how institutions were responding to the challenges and opportunities of the introduction of these new quality arrangements. The availability of the Academic Infrastructure had enabled most institutions to review their arrangements for the management of quality and academic standards in order to align with the advice it contained. The Academic Infrastructure had also enabled Institutional audit teams to identify more firmly where institutions' arrangements were - or were not - meeting the needs of students and other stakeholders and to identify good practice or make recommendations accordingly.

The corresponding papers in the second series of *Outcomes...* show that the elements of the Academic Infrastructure have become more firmly embedded within institutional policy and practice. The FHEQ had generated considerable thought and debate within institutions, who had reflected on their internal award structures and adjusted them where appropriate in order to align with national expectations. Most institutions had mechanisms to ensure that oversight of the application of the FHEQ and alignment with it was taken at an institutional level. Engagement and awareness was not always as apparent at discipline level, and reference to the FHEQ in programme specifications was found to be variable. Nevertheless, the majority of discipline audit trails concluded that intended learning outcomes were pitched at the appropriate level or that the standard of achievement displayed by students was appropriate to the location of the award on the FHEQ. Papers in the first and second series of *Outcomes...* are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/outcomes.

On the whole, institutions, their subject teams and departments had engaged with subject benchmark statements, using them to review curriculum content and maintain academic standards. Institutional quality assurance processes ensured that subject benchmark statements were considered in programme approval, validation and revalidation procedures, and were mapped to individual programme specifications.

For some institutions, programme specifications had acted as a catalyst for widespread change, resulting in improvements to quality management arrangements. More widely, they had become embedded within processes for approval and validation of new programmes and periodic review of existing provisions. As well as being a reference point in its own right, the programme specification is also one way in which links are made to other external reference points, including the other elements of the Academic Infrastructure. They are also key sources of information for students, both current and prospective, and for other stakeholders.