

Section 4. General guidance on progression

Introduction

In outlining the research approach adopted for this project (see Section 2), the value of QAA documentation in providing general guidance on progression matters for UK higher education institutions is noted. As discussion in this section demonstrates, both the QAA's subject benchmarking statements and qualifications framework documents are helpful in this respect. So, too, are the European initiatives concerned with developing qualifications frameworks for higher education as part of the Bologna Process, which, through establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, aims to make European higher education more comparable and transparent. Whilst frameworks of this type are by no means problem-free in terms of either formulation or application, they are of interest and help with progression matters, because they define outcomes that might be expected of students in achieving different levels of award, including those both at and within undergraduate programmes.

For details of the European initiatives, see the Bologna Process website at <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

QAA subject benchmarking statements

Not many of the fifty benchmarking statements that have so far been published devote a specific section to progression. And, as in the case of history, those that do provide only brief discussion, with few examples being given. A number of others make reference to aspects of progression, usually in discussing learning, teaching and assessment matters, and though they give little detail, they nonetheless provide useful guidance.

In considering this guidance, extracts from the statements are grouped under the key curricular dimensions of skills development, content selection, learning and teaching approaches and assessment strategies, though some overlap occurs. In each case, selections of statements that have widespread applicability are given and comments are made on them as a prelude to further discussion in subsequent sections. The statements, many of which have been revised and re-issued in 2007, can be found on the QAA website at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp>

Content selection

It is expected that there will be greater opportunities for students to pursue more specialist courses in their second and third years of study (and fourth year for an honours degree in Scotland). (Criminology)

The majority of programmes use systems of optional courses, at least in later stages, enabling students to study a chosen range of themes, periods or genres, alongside a core of courses that extends the knowledge base and the understanding of the principles and methodologies which underlie the study of HAAD. (History of Art, Architecture and Design)

There are general principles which should shape any provision, including the notion of progression through the various levels of the programme in terms of increasing academic content, understanding and complexity. Not only will the development of knowledge occur, but graduates will be able to take a more critical stance to the theories, findings and approaches of the discipline. (Psychology)

Thus in terms of knowledge, it is expected that there will be greater opportunities for students to pursue more specialist units in the second and third years of a course in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and in years three and four of an Honours course in Scotland. (Social Policy and Administration & Social Work)

Subject matter may be presented in non-sequential ways; it is for individual programmes to articulate appropriate principles of progression and make clear how the curriculum design promotes increasing maturity in the integration of theory, practice and specialist knowledge. (History of Art, Architecture and Design)

Skills development

Thus, in the first year of an honours programme in Criminology, the emphasis will normally be on developing basic research, information retrieval and study skills. This should enable students at subsequent levels to strengthen their analytical, interpretative and communication skills and, by graduation, to demonstrate the problem-solving, evaluative and reflective skills intrinsic to the discipline and the attributes needed for self-managed, lifelong learning. (Criminology)

Skills need to be taught, practised and assessed within a curriculum framework that is balanced, coherent and progressive, so that the level of challenge and achievement is gradually increased throughout, taking students to the boundaries of research frontiers. (Geography)

In terms of skills, progression should also be a keynote. Thus in level one a course should normally develop basic research, information retrieval and study skills. This should enable the students at subsequent levels to strengthen their analytical, interpretative and communication skills; and by graduation, to demonstrate the problem-solving evaluative and reflective skills intrinsic to the discipline and the attributes for self-managed, life-long learning. (Social Policy and Administration & social Work)

Learning and teaching

Students entering higher education from sixth-form or comparable studies emerge with an experience of a heavily taught regime, in which the discipline required for learning is maintained primarily by teachers working to highly specific examination syllabuses. The endpoint of their university studies may be defined by contrast as an environment in which that discipline has become mostly self-discipline, and where study methods are developed and sustained primarily by students taking on responsibility themselves for their own learning,

with support from teaching staff, in the context of much greater choice within the syllabus. (Classics and Ancient History)

Progression through programmes will lead to an increasing emphasis on student self-direction and self-responsibility in the learning and teaching strategies deployed. (Communication, Media, Film, and Cultural Studies)

Honours level studies in HAAD may be understood as framework within which the student exercises considerable autonomy, and where study methods are developed and sustained largely by students themselves as they take responsibility for their own learning. For most students, this contrasts with the more closely supported, and task-orientated, environment of pre-university studies. The journey, however, will be different for every student, depending on personal qualities and prior experience. (History of Art, Architecture and Design)

As students progress through a degree programme there will be increasing reliance on student-centred modes of learning which will foster the development of a professional approach to lifelong learning. (Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural Sciences, Food Sciences and Consumer Sciences)

Autonomy and ability to learn: This is perhaps the key feature of graduateness. The ability to learn and make use of learning in an independent fashion is what is generally taken to distinguish the final year student from the first year student. (Law)

The teaching and learning strategy should be designed to encourage a progressive acquisition of subject knowledge and skills by moving from study methods that have a greater degree of support and assistance gradually towards more independence and self-direction. (Biosciences)

Assessment strategies

Feedback on all assessment activities is essential for student development and progression. Methods of assessment should reflect progression within the programme of study, assess both knowledge and skills and enable students to demonstrate their level of attainment of subject-specific and generic knowledge, understanding and skills. (Health Studies)

Methods of assessment should reflect progression within undergraduate programmes and assessment strategies will include a range of methods which allow students from different backgrounds and with diverse life experience to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the discipline effectively. (Social policy and administration)

On completion of honours undergraduate planning programmes, graduates should typically have completed at least one major piece of work that demonstrates their individual research, problem-solving and evaluative competencies in planning, within a capacity for reflective, self-directed learning. (Town & Country Planning)

Opportunities for the formal assessment of students' independent and more specialised study, eg the presentation of a dissertation, will normally occur in the final year. (Criminology)

A focus on active and reflective learning is expected in addition to providing the opportunity to carry out an extensive piece of relevant work. Normally this would be in the form of an extended project in the final year where the synthesis and integration of the various skills and knowledge acquired throughout the course can be demonstrated. (Architectural technology)

Points arising:

1. Where content progressions are mentioned, the move towards optional, more specialised course units prevails, seemingly reflecting a desire to recognise students' growing maturity and independence, as well as to permit them to study in greater depth.
2. Whilst lengthy lists of subject-specific and more general skills are included in all benchmark statements, few suggest how these skills might be developed in a progressive manner. However, of those that do, one highlights the importance of promoting reflective and evaluative skills during the final year of studies and another that skills enhancement should be progressively increased to enable students to operate at the 'boundaries of research frontiers', with the implication that they can help the boundaries to be extended. Reticence in offering advice of this type may reflect both a rejection of the notion of skills' hierarchies, as well as unwillingness to demonstrate how particular skills might be applied in more sophisticated ways.
3. Progression statements concerning students working with a high degree of independence during the final year of their programme are commonly found in the benchmarking statements, giving rise to questions about the type and degree of support they should be given. In practice, this is likely to vary from programme to programme and from one student to another, but some general guidance is given in the Law benchmarking statement.

Obviously, an independent learner will need some support and some broad structure within which to operate. The extent of guidance required will depend on a student's stage of development in the field and the complexity of the material. However, by the honours stage the teacher input should indeed be small. The independent undergraduate should be able to take the initiative to seek support and feedback.

Of course, much depends here on what is meant by 'small', but the implication is that students may receive appreciably less in the way of collective forms of teaching during the final year of their studies than previously, at least as far as lecturing is concerned.

4. The observation made in some benchmarking statements that assessment should reflect progression within programmes of study seems principally to relate to the idea that, in moving increasingly towards independent learning, students should undertake a final-year dissertation. But how far independent learning should be reflected in student-designed assignment being required, or at least encouraged, more generally during the final year remains an issue.

QAA frameworks for higher educational qualifications

That separate frameworks are provided for Scotland and the rest of the UK reflects the differing educational systems that prevail, though many similarities and alignments arise. The documents can be viewed in full and in summary form on the QAA website by taking the link from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/>

General considerations

Descriptors are provided for the different levels of achievement associated with particular qualifications. Thus, in the case of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there are five of them, corresponding to certificate, intermediate, honours, masters, doctoral levels.

The qualifications descriptors are in two parts:

- a) A statement of the outcomes a student should demonstrate to gain the qualification award. This part is aimed at those designing, reviewing and approving academic programmes.
- b) A statement of the wider abilities that a student can typically be expected to have developed. Employers are expected to be amongst those interested in this part.

Since the former is directed at curriculum design, its provisions are particularly useful in terms of defining progression from one stage of provision to the next. To give a general impression of the differences between levels, details extracted from the executive summary of the document are given below.

Certificate level

- Sound knowledge of the basic concepts of a subject.
- Know how to take different approaches to solving problems.
- Communicate accurately.

Intermediate level

- A sound understanding of the principles in their field of study and will have learned to apply those principles more widely.
- Learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems.

Honours level

- An understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline.
- Analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment.
- Be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate effectively.

Masters level

- Originally in the application of knowledge, and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research.

- Be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively.
- Originality in solving problems.

Doctoral level

- Create and interpret knowledge, which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research.
- Conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding.

Annex 1 of the framework document gives a more detailed breakdown of the descriptors for each of the levels. As an example, the outcomes for a bachelor's degree with honours are given below.

- a) A systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline.
- b) An ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within discipline.
- c) Conceptual understanding that enables the student:
 - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; and
 - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;
- d) An appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge.
- e) The ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (eg refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Progression considerations

In using the qualification descriptors to help in coping with progression matters, three main considerations need to be borne in mind:

- a) The descriptors are helpful in distinguishing different levels of provision that are deemed appropriate at successive levels. However, they are regarded as being part of a framework than as a means of imposing a straightjacket.
- b) The development of skills is not seen as being explicitly addressed in the qualification descriptors. At issue here is that many of the skills involved are discipline or profession specific, so they are best dealt with in benchmarking statements. Yet the benchmark statements tend only to provide lists of skills without comment on how they might be developed from level to level.
- c) The point is made in the framework documents that higher education institutions 'need to be able to demonstrate how the design of curricula secures academic and intellectual progression'.

Points arising:

1. Avoiding using the framework as a straightjacket rather than as a guide is crucial if the ambitions in designing individual degree programmes are to be realised. With regard to history programmes, for example, that part of the detailed honours-level descriptor stipulating students' ability 'to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (eg refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline)', is highly likely to apply at earlier stages of provision (intermediate and certificate). The question might well be one of the degree to which students are expected to achieve these objectives at each stage as they progress through their programmes of study, perhaps doing so in all the course units they take during the honours year, compared with, say, only half during the preceding year. And account would also need to be taken of the degree of sophistication students are expected to achieve in using primary material at each level.
2. Whilst the development of skills may not be explicitly addressed in the frameworks, as is evident from the above example, the attainment of skills certainly is. One consideration to emerge here is that the frameworks may have particular value in helping to design combined honours degrees, giving useful guidance on what might be generally expected across subjects at different levels of provision.
3. The point concerning the need to design curricula so that 'academic and intellectual' progression is achieved relates back to the issues of achieving reasonable consistency amongst course teams about their expectations of students at each level and of helping students to understand the requirements made of them as they move from stage to the next in their programmes of study.

The EHEA framework for educational qualifications

In February, 2005, the Bologna Group on Frameworks Qualifications reported its recommendation that the 'Dublin Descriptors' should be adopted to create the Framework for Educational Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area. (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (2005), p.101.) The document can be viewed by taking the link (under the Reports heading) at <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Bergen/Conference.htm>

The descriptors were issued following a meeting in October, 2004 of the Joint Quality Initiative, an informal network concerned with quality assurance and accreditation of bachelor and master degree programmes in Europe. The framework is seen as an being over-arching with a high level of generality and will link with frameworks operating at national level. It is also anticipated that each country should certify the compatibility of its own framework with that of the overarching framework.

Three sequential cycles of provision are distinguished within which all European higher education qualifications are to be located. The first cycle corresponds to bachelor level degrees, the second cycle to master's level degrees and the third cycle to doctorates. The

descriptors for each cycle are based on learning outcomes and competencies under the five headings of knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgements; communication; and learning skills. They are seen to 'offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle'.

In recognition that various higher education awards are available to students who have undertaken a programme of study within the first cycle, but who have not completed that cycle, a further level of provision is made available, referred to as a higher education short cycle (within the first cycle).

The descriptors for each of the three cycles are given below

Short cycle (within the first cycle) awards are made to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;
- have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;
- can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients;
- have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.

First cycle awards are made to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon and their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;
- have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;
- can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

Second cycle awards are made to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with Bachelor's level, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context;

- can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;
- have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;
- can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously;
- have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

Third cycle awards are made to students who:

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;
- have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;
- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas;
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;
- can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society.

The descriptors can be seen by taking the link at <http://www.jointquality.nl/>

Points arising:

1. The degree and nature of differentiation between levels becomes apparent by reformulating the descriptors according to the five headings specified.
2. In common with the QAA UK qualifications framework, the European qualifications framework has particular value in drawing attention to the need to plan provision in context, with each stage being seen to make appropriate but increasing demands on students. From a UK perspective, the former offers the greater advantage in aiding curriculum design, not only in terms of the detail provided, but also in reflecting existing practice and differentiating more closely within the first cycle provision. Even, so, useful elements of differentiation appear in the latter, including the notion of a third-cycle student communicating with the larger scholarly community and undertaking original research worthy of national or international referred publication. It may be, of course, that some students would achieve both these outcomes before the third cycle, though there would be no expectation that they would.

Other guidance

European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The EHEA Framework for Educational Qualifications links with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the establishment of which received the endorsement of the European parliament in October, 2007. At its core are eight levels of learning outcomes, with descriptors applying to knowledge, skills and wider competencies. The levels apply to all types of qualification, vocational and non-vocational, from those achieved at the end of compulsory education to those at the highest reaches of academic, vocational and professional education and training. The EQF is claimed to be fully compatible with the EHEA Framework. Thus the EQF descriptor at level 5 corresponds to that of the higher education short cycle; EQF level 6 to the higher education first cycle (bachelor level); EQF level 7 to the higher education second cycle (masters level); and EQF level 8 to the higher education third cycle (doctorate level). As exemplars, the descriptors for levels 6 and 7 are given below.

Level	Knowledge	Skills	Wider competences
6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts. Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups.
7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research.	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches. Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams.

For further details, see The European Qualifications Framework web site at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/index_en.html

A key skills framework for higher education

Peter Washer has reviewed a range of statements concerned with developing key skills, including the EHEA Framework and the UK's Curriculum and Quality Authority's national key skills framework, to devise a key skills framework that, he suggests, can be used or adapted by any discipline at university level. He remarks that students need to be able to identify

where in their undergraduate studies they acquired their key skills, which he identifies as *communication; working with others; problem solving; numeracy; the use of information technology; learning how to learn; and personal and professional development.*

Washer has devised tables showing how the skills of the undergraduate can be expected to develop over the course of their studies. The levels correspond to the Quality Assurance Agency's, with certificate (level 4), intermediate (level 5) and honours (level 6) being distinguished, along with a level 3 entry table.

An example of the progression descriptors stated in the tables with regard to using information technology is given in Section 7.

For further details, see P.Washer, 'Revisiting Key Skills: A Practical Framework for Higher Education', *Quality in Higher Education*, 13 (2007), 57-67.

Points arising:

1. Particular key skills, and hence their progressive development, may be considered to have greater importance in some subject disciplines, or within specialised sections of disciplines, than in others. In the case of history, for example, the study of social and economic aspects may be seen to bring a greater need for students to apply and develop their numeracy skills than is general in the subject.
2. The issue arises of whether some skills, not least working in groups and ICT applications, should be developed in every course unit at each level of provision, or whether particular course units should assume the responsibility. The former approach may cause concern because of perceived or actual inadequacies amongst course team members, whilst the latter approach implies introducing elements of compulsion at each level.
3. The question of further enhancing key skills beyond undergraduate level also arises.