

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

LEARNING AND TEACHING COMMITTEE

18 June 2014

CONSULTATION ON THE UK QUALITY CODE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION, PART A: SETTING AND MAINTAINING ACADEMIC STANDARDS, THE UK FRAMEWORKS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

Extract from Introduction to the Consultation by QAA

The QAA are consulting on an updated and revised version of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, which are formal components of *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) (Circular letter CL 05/14 refers). The document brings together the two frameworks - *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS) - into a single publication.

The two frameworks provide important reference points for higher education providers, assisting them in setting and maintaining academic standards. They are central to the Expectation in *Chapter A1: The national level* of the Quality Code that degree-awarding bodies use external UK and European reference points to secure threshold academic standards across the higher education sector.

Simultaneous revision of the FHEQ and FQHEIS provides the opportunity to publish the two frameworks together as a single document and emphasise the many features that unite them. Producing one document with a single explanatory text to accompany the frameworks will reduce duplication and complexity and will provide the opportunity to place the levels of the two frameworks side by side to demonstrate their alignment.

This change has been accomplished without necessitating changes of substance to the text of either the FHEQ or FQHEIS. Both documents already contain the same specific guidance on assessment and awarding and naming qualifications. At postgraduate level, the qualifications descriptors of the FHEQ and FQHEIS are common to both frameworks. At undergraduate levels, where qualification descriptors differ, the single document includes all the qualification descriptors of both frameworks. This raises the possibility of greater alignment and harmonisation of qualification descriptors between the two frameworks in the future. There are questions within the online survey about this potential development.

The final version of *The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications* will be published at the end of October 2014 and will come into effect as a reference point for the purpose of reviews carried out by QAA from August 2015.

Faculty Responses

Questions 1 to 4 are introductory relating to the name of the institution etc. The Academic Office invited Faculties to consider questions 5 – 21 of the survey which includes a number of questions about proposed modifications to the table that illustrates the typical qualifications at each level of the frameworks and to forward a

response by 2 June 2014. Responses were received from all Faculties and are set out below.

The institutional response will be submitted through the online survey which closes on Friday 27 June 2014.

The Committee is asked to consider the Faculty responses to questions 5 to 21 below and to agree an institutional response.

Faculty Responses

5. Do you agree that the FHEQ and the FQHEIS should be published in a single document with a single explanatory text?

All agreed except the Faculty of Social Sciences which responded that Scotland possesses a very distinctive education system to that of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

6. Does the proposed document adequately clarify the position of the frameworks within Part A of the Quality Code?

All agreed except the Faculty of Social Sciences which responded that colleagues found it difficult to unpack the FHEQ and the FQHEIS.

7. Is the proposed document comprehensive and logically structured?

All agreed.

8. Would the addition of boxes for references/additional resource materials at appropriate points be helpful?

All agreed except Social Sciences.

Computing and Engineering suggested that reference be made to the NICATS project, as this was a landmark contribution, that also involved the good work of the University of Ulster. Given that there are references within Ulster's handbooks, they considered that it seems right that the QAA document should acknowledge this work with a reference embedded. Question 8 provides an opportunity to flag that.

The Ulster Business School suggests that more explanation in relation to Bologna should be included.

[Academic Office Note: NICATS was a credit system which became the agreed basis of the QAA guidance for England (and Northern Ireland) (2008), and is referred to therein.]

9. Is the Introduction clear and comprehensive?

All agreed.

10. Is Table 1, which presents the two frameworks together, clear and accurate?

All agreed except the Faculties of Life and Health Sciences and Social Sciences. Other comments are provided below:

Arts considered that the table is clear enough, though the column relating to the QF-EHEA does not really offer very much information: it cannot of course list all the qualifications across Europe but maybe a few examples from key countries such as France and Germany could be provided.

Life and Health Sciences considers the table to be very useful but notes that the Associate Bachelor's Degree (240) at level 5 has not been included.

[Academic Office Note: the 'Associate Bachelor' degree has little currency in the UK, where the DipHE is the common equivalent qualification at this level.]

Social Sciences considers that the inclusion of the QF-EHEA cycle is very confusing and suggests it be taken out.

11. A new cell indicating the level of first qualifications in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science has been included. Are the examples of qualifications listed representative and appropriate?

All agreed.

12. The text within column 1 of the Table 1 now indicates that HNCs and HNDs at levels 4 and 5 of the FHEQ are those awarded by degree-awarding bodies (under licence from Pearson). A new footnote has been added which identifies the other awarding bodies that award HNCs and HNDs and the national qualifications frameworks on which they are located. Do these changes constitute a helpful and acceptable clarification?

All agreed except Social Sciences which commented that constant use of abbreviations is very confusing and there is no explanation of what SQA is. (Footnote 9)

13. The document sets out all the variants of qualification descriptors used in the two UK frameworks. Is it sufficiently clear to which framework(s) each belongs?

All agreed except the Faculties of Art, Design and the Built Environment and Social Sciences.

ADBE considers that whilst they are clear within the current structure it is quite difficult to make comparisons between levels within a jurisdiction. Rather the new structure perhaps facilitates better comparison with the difference within Scotland which is a comparison on a day to day basis that is less likely to be required than between levels.

Social Sciences considers that this needs to be simplified in terms of the merger of the two frameworks.

14. Should we move, as a subsequent phase, to the adoption of a harmonised set of qualification descriptors and in particular:

1 Should there be a single qualification descriptor for the CertHE instead of one for EWNI and one for Scotland?

All responded 'Yes' except Social Sciences.

2 Should there be two qualification descriptors at level 5 of the FHEQ/ SCQF level 7 of the FQHEIS, one of which is for the foundation degree and one for the DipHE?

All responded 'Yes' except Social Sciences.

3 Should the qualification descriptor for the foundation degree currently in the FHEQ apply to Scotland as well as to EWNI?

All responded 'Yes' except Social Sciences.

4 Should the qualification descriptor for the DipHE currently used in the FQHEIS apply to EWNI as well as to Scotland?

All responded 'Yes' except for the Faculties of Art, Design and the Built Environment and Social Sciences. Life and Health Sciences notes that the University does not offer DipHEs.

[Academic Office Note: the University equivalent is AB.]

5 Should there be a single qualification descriptor for the bachelor's degree with honours instead of one for EWNI and one for the Bachelor's degree with honours in Scotland?

All responded 'Yes' except for Social Sciences which considers that that the attempt to create a single framework from two separate and distinct systems creates more confusion than maintaining two separate frameworks.

Arts reports a difference of opinion among respondents in their Faculty in relation to this, though the majority view (reflected above) is that a standardised UK-wide approach would be preferable given the movement of students across the four constituent parts of the UK. The issue might of course become immaterial if the forthcoming referendum in Scotland produces a 'yes' result.

15. **We have added a sentence (in paragraph 4.8.5) to explain that the title Dr used by medical doctors is an abbreviation for their profession and doesn't signify a doctoral-level qualification. Is this appropriate and acceptable?**

All agreed.

Arts considers that it is important that this sentence be made more inclusive and to mention not only medical doctors, but also dentists and veterinary surgeons. [Academic Office Note: do such practitioners use this convention?]

16. **We have added a short paragraph (4.8.6) to explain the anomaly of certain MA degrees awarded by the Scottish Ancients which are not at SCQF level 11 but at level 10. Is this appropriate and acceptable?**

All agreed except for Social Sciences which noted that 4.8.6 is actually numbered 4.10.

[Academic Office Note: sub-paragraphs 4.8.1-5 relate to Master's degrees and should be numbered 4.9.1-5 to reflect their position in the document.]

17. **In the section on volumes of learning and credit (paragraph 6.14), we refer to Annex C which comprises a new table which sets out (for information only as the FHEQ and FQHEIS are qualifications and not credit and qualifications frameworks) the current credit arrangements in the four jurisdictions of the UK. Is Annex C accurate and helpful?**

All agreed.

Art, Design and the Built Environment suggests that whilst it is helpful, perhaps a simple restructuring within the credit boxes where the amounts of credits are noted in the first line and on the breakdown by region underneath is needed. Critically they want to see the amount of credits initially and then how these can/are made up perhaps by including the breakdown there e.g. 120 at level 4. Is there a need to reinforce e.g. FCHQ within the boxes as this is probably clear already?

[Academic Office Note: the University's Qualifications and Credit Framework exceeds the national minimum in four qualifications.

Professional doctorates: Ulster 540 (420 at level 8) vs EWNI 540 (360)
Bachelor's degrees with Honours: 360 (120 at level 6) vs EWNI 360 (90).
Graduate diplomas: 120 (90 at level 6) vs EWNI 80 (80).
Foundation degrees: 240 (100 at level 6) vs EWNI 240 (90).]

18. In paragraphs 6.17 and 6.18 we have tried to clarify that: a) postgraduate and graduate diplomas are differentiated from postgraduate and graduate certificates respectively by volume of learning and not by level, whereas b) undergraduate diplomas are distinguished from undergraduate certificates by level (not volume). Do these changes to the paragraphs constitute an appropriate clarification?

All agreed.

Arts comment that technically, these paragraphs are accurate; having said this, confusion may be caused by the way this section of the document refers to postgraduate, graduate, and undergraduate certificates and diplomas. The words 'graduate' and 'postgraduate' are often used interchangeably (as in 'graduate student'), so the use of a term 'graduate diploma/certificate' for a level 6 qualification (i.e. the same level as what is commonly referred to as an undergraduate degree) can be confusing. Would it not be better to speak about level 6 diplomas/certificates, as opposed to level 5 diplomas and level 4 certificates?

19. The circular letter and introduction to this survey explains that a number of degree awarding bodies have expressed an interest in adding the Juris Doctor to their portfolio of awards. Would it be acceptable to add to paragraphs 6.17 and 6.20 a footnote explaining that:

- the award of a Juris Doctor is an exception to the principle that the title doctor should only be used for qualifications meeting the qualification descriptor for FHEQ level 8/SCQF level 12 in full;
- the Juris Doctor is not a doctoral qualification at level 8 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 12 but at level 6 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS (with some modules at level 7 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS);
- holders of the qualification are not entitled to use the title Dr.

All agreed.

20. Do you agree that QAA should explore in partnership with key stakeholders ways by which users of qualifications frameworks, including students and employers, could be enabled to make better sense of the range of higher qualifications available and make appropriate decisions?

All agreed.

21. Are there any other comments you would like to make?

Comments are provided below:

Art, Design and the Built Environment - Whilst the inclusion of all areas is useful there are certainly concerns that the inclusion in the current form has made the document and its ease of understanding more complex as one seeks to ensure

that one is considering the correct framework and level. For example, the text on page 25 when addressing levels can become quite lengthy and whilst clear is less user friendly now. In short the document in its current form is perhaps less user-friendly but for informative/comparative purposes. Critically it must be decided which of these is most important to achieve or whether structural changes within the document may assist in bringing these aims closer together.

Arts - Given the increasing numbers of UK students choosing to study in Continental Europe, not least a result of the fee differential between the UK and most countries on the Continent, it would be useful for the document to make more explicit reference to European qualifications. Maybe an appendix mapping some of the most relevant qualifications from key countries taking in the highest numbers of UK students could be included? Or a link to a more comprehensive document mapping those qualifications across Europe?

Computing and Engineering - The table on page 7 and notes on page 8 raise the issue of Pearson HNCs/ HNDs: they are on the QCF/ NQF framework, and not strictly on the FHEQ. The notes make clear this is an alignment, but the overall table makes it look as if these are qualifications of degree awarding bodies.

Social Sciences - If the plan to engage with non-academic professionals and other stakeholders some work is required on the language and forms of expression to communicate the framework concerned.

Ulster Business School - In relation to Integrated Master's programmes in the table on p7 - some clarification would be useful in relation to whether these would encompass Pre-Master's programmes specifically designed for international students entering the UK system, who don't meet the academic or English language requirements for studying in the UK, and who may have, following completion of particular subjects (eg academic writing, study skills, research techniques, language) the opportunity to progress to a Master's programme in the UK.

10 June 2014

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