

# Level descriptors, subject benchmarks and their use

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# Outline

- How to describe learning achievements?
- Establishing external reference points for academic standards
  - European developments
  - National developments
- University and academic community responses at subject level
- Expectations and Outcomes

# Academic standards: a definition

The level of achievement a student has to reach to gain an academic award (qualification).

# Some words about level descriptors

- Level descriptors may describe the characteristics of learning expected at each stage of a programme and/or the end of a cycle.
- The ECTS does not have level descriptors but many national credit systems do
- The EHEA-Bologna qualifications framework has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle:
  - Knowledge and understanding
  - Application of knowledge
  - Ability to gather and interpret relevant data
  - Communication skills
  - Learning skills for progression to further study

# **European developments: reference points for academic standards and quality assurance**

## **EHEA (Bologna)— Framework of higher education qualifications**

- Three cycles with possibility of intermediate qualifications at national level within the first cycle
- Generic descriptors
- Suggested ECTS credit ranges
- Self certification process
- Stocktaking in 2007

## **European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)**

- Values and principles for internal and external quality assurance
- Development of European Register of QA agencies – E4
- National implementation of ESG
- Stocktaking in 2007

# ESG for internal quality assurance

“the realisation of the EHEA depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programmes have clear and explicit intended outcomes....”

## **ESG Standard 1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards (qualifications)**

**Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards (qualifications).**

The QA of programmes and awards should include:

- development and publication of explicit learning outcomes
- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content
- specific needs of different modes of delivery
- externality and feedback from employers and others
- participation of students in quality assurance activities .....

# **ESG Standard 1.3 Assessment of students**

**Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which re applied consistently.**

Student assessment procedures are expected to:

- be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives
- be appropriate for purpose, whether diagnostic, formative or summative
- where possible not rely solely on the judgments of single examiners.....



# **ESG Standard 1.5 Learning resources and student support**

Institutions should ensure that resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

# So, where is the input to academic standards and quality at subject (discipline) level?

- The academics take initiatives
  - Tuning project in the EU, but limited information and application [www.relint.deusto.es/Tuning](http://www.relint.deusto.es/Tuning)
  - Participating in subject benchmarking in the UK (more later) [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)
- The professions act
  - International recognition agreements – for example the Washington Accord [www.washingtonaccord.org](http://www.washingtonaccord.org)
  - The EQUIS standards for MBAs [www.efmd.be](http://www.efmd.be)
  - APEC architect
  - Participating in subject benchmarking in the UK

# Subject benchmark statements

- state expectations about the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in particular subject area
- they are about the intellectual capability and understanding that should be developed
- while there is a relatively similar format they are radically different in length, specificity and prescription depending on the nature of the subject and in many cases its relationship to the regulated professions

# An indicative structure for drafting subject benchmark statements

- defining principles
- nature and extent of the subject
- subject knowledge, understanding and skills
- teaching, learning and assessment
- standards

# Expectations and outcomes: the development and use of subject benchmark statements in the UK

- Not the idea of the academic community.....but engagement in development has led to a sense of ownership and ‘internalising’ of national statements within individual university contexts.
- An opportunity for debate in the subject community at large and to start discussions within teaching teams.
- A useful tool in developing joint degrees.
- Information for employers and students.
- A contribution to external reference points for academic standards both within and across institutions.

# Subject benchmarking does not stand still: current debates and issues

- Refreshing/reviewing existing statements every five years (Engineering currently out for public consultation.)
- What about ‘subjects’ without a benchmark statement? Recognition scheme
- What about more benchmark statements at master’s level?
- Evaluating the use of benchmark statements and comparing them to international developments such as Tuning

# Subject benchmark statements..

are part of the UK Academic Infrastructure for quality and standards in higher education....not the only instrument used to provide the higher education sector with a framework for the management of academic quality and standards.