

# Designing a Programme of Studies

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# Designing a programme of studies of acceptable quality needs

- time,
- commitment,
- effort,
- leadership
- collaboration and
- compromise.

The optimal design of a programme of studies cannot be undertaken by a single professor operating in isolation from others.

Ideally it should involve all those who will be responsible for the delivery of the programme.

A student will experience all the inputs to a programme collectively, and

**the design of a programme should be seen as the design of what will be the students' educational experience.**

There needs to be a consensus among all those responsible for individual course units regarding the intended learning outcomes overall, and therefore agreement on

**the relationship between the individual units,**

both

*the support which those taken earlier give the achievement of the learning outcomes of later units,*

and

*the relative demands they make in terms of the students' total workload at any time.*

Each person contributing to the programme of studies will have his or her own specialist perspective

and

it is almost certain that there will be conflicting interests which will need

**reconciliation through group debate**

and that

**compromises will need to be accepted.**

It follows that the design of a programme of studies needs to be

**a collaborative venture**

with

**appropriate leadership.**

There will need to be **consultations**, possibly repeated, with people outside the programme team itself.

These will include those responsible for learning support services within the institution, such as librarians, and others outside the institution, such as potential employers or professional associations.

It may also be necessary to **negotiate** with whoever is responsible for the allocation of resources in order to optimise their availability for the programme,

including staff and the commitment of part of their workload.

It may be that the special resource needs of the programme can be reduced by using existing course units (e.g. in Quantitative Methods) from other programmes of study,

but this too will probably require **negotiation**,

ideally with some incorporation of those responsible into the programme design team.

If the programme of study being designed

**replaces a previous programme,**

then

**the strengths and weaknesses**

of that programme should be identified in whatever ways are available.

For example, there may be data on student recruitment for the previous programme, student wastage and graduate employment, including those who proceeded in further Higher Education.

There may also be a record of internal or external evaluations of the previous programme.

In any case, students on the existing programme should be consulted, and might even be incorporated into the programme design team.

Graduates of the previous programme should also be consulted if at all possible (possibly through a questionnaire),

as well as the employers of such graduates.

**Ideally a replacement programme of study should retain the strengths of the previous programme and also rectify its weaknesses, taking into account the reasons why it needed to be replaced.**

*(This should be included as a stated rationale for the new programme in the context of its submission for external approval.)*

The design of any programme of study will necessarily take place within a set of parameters.

These are likely to include the following:

- National Laws or policies
- Institutional regulations and policies (e.g. an institution may require all course units to have the same number of ECTS credits or multiples thereof.)
- The resources which will be available for the programme of studies (including staffing strengths)

Prior decisions are also likely to have been made (e.g. as part of the institution's academic plan) on, for example:

- The subject of the programme
- The final level of the programme
- The level at which students will enter the programme
- The mode of study (e.g. full-time, part-time, distance learning, or 'mixed mode')
- Target student numbers

The programme design team's task is

*to devise the best programme of studies that can be achieved within all the predetermined parameters.*

Decisions will need to be made under at least the headings which follow and should be recorded.

*They are not listed in the order in which the issues will necessarily be resolved, since programme design is an iterative rather than a linear process.*

*(All decisions should remain open to revision until the end of the process.)*

- The title of the programme
- The inclusion of any intermediate awards
- The intended learning outcomes for the programme as a whole, (including at intermediate stages if intermediate awards are to be made available)
- The entry requirements and methods of selection and admission

- The structure of the programme in terms of named units of study
- Prerequisites, if any, required for entry to each study unit
- Electives, and whether free or with limited choice (if the latter, an identification of the electives to be made available)
- Learning outcomes for each course unit

- For each course unit: the estimated student workload (in total hours - expressed as ECTS credits) divided between timetabled hours and non-timetabled hours
- For each unit of study: teaching method/s to be employed within timetabled hours
- A syllabus for each course unit (i.e. what field of study is expected to be covered by the student)

- Any required reading (i.e. any set texts or text books)
- Consideration to what might be recommended reading.

*Reading lists are a good indication of both level and workload. Those responsible should check the availability of reading to be recommended.*

- For each unit of study: the assessment method/s to be employed to establish whether the intended learning outcomes have been achieved
- For the programme as a whole and for course units which have particular needs, the support which can be assumed for student learning/practice outside timetabled hours
- The arrangements to be made for any planned work experience during the programme, how it will be set up, supervised and how far (and how) it will be assessed

- The availability of lecture rooms and any necessary specialised accommodation (e.g. laboratories) which can be assumed
- The availability of any necessary specialised equipment and materials which can be assumed
- The availability of administrative (and if necessary technician) support which can be assumed

- The procedures and specific regulations for examinations and student progression within the programme
- The arrangements for the assessment and certification of students (if not predetermined by the institution)

- The teaching staff for the programme and their expertise
- An identification of who will have immediate and overall responsibility for the management of the programme and its co-ordination
- Arrangements for regular meetings of the staff responsible for delivery of the programme
- The aspects, inputs and outputs to be regularly monitored (performance indicators)

- The availability of programme information for students (if not predetermined by the institution)
- The arrangements for feedback from students
- The arrangements for feedback from employers
- Any inter-institutional arrangements (regular student exchanges, etc)

How the programme should be formally outlined  
(the ‘**programme specification**’)

and the appropriate level of detail

depends on the purpose for which it is used

*but all programme specifications for the same  
programme should be consistent with one another*

A recent QAA (UK) survey has found programme specifications being used for various purposes, including as:

- a curriculum design tool;
- a support for evaluation;
- an effective QA tool for programme teams (encouraging strategic thinking focusing an overview of the programme);

*as well as*

- a link with planning;
- a student recruitment aid;
- information for students on programmes;
- information for employers; and
- an adjunct to the diploma supplement.

Institutions have attempted to overcome the problem of writing for multiple audiences in different ways, e.g. by:

- writing different versions for different audiences (e.g. students)
- producing a generic programme specification from which relevant information can be followed up through references, and
- using a web-based, 'layered' approach so that links can be followed at various points to

An updating of the QAA '*Guidelines for programme specifications*' is anticipated for April 2006.

(See [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk))

If programmes of study are externally evaluated the national Agency should indicate its expectations in terms of programme specification,

but

(i) it should seek to minimise any additional burden placed on the institution and

(ii) it should be clear that questioning in an evaluation can go beyond the programme specification.

*As an example of (ii), it would be legitimate to ask about recommended reading, although this would not normally be included in a programme specification.*

In programme evaluation it is legitimate to ask a programme team anything they might have been expected to have asked themselves.