

# 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.