

GRADUATE STANDARDS PROGRAMME



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The Graduate Standards Programme Final Report

The final report, giving the main outcomes and recommendations from the Higher Education Quality Council's Graduate Standards Programme (GSP) was published on 4 July 1997. It comprises *Volume 1 – the report* itself including an executive summary, and *Volume 2 – the supplementary material* including details of the work undertaken and its findings, the results of the consultation on a draft report circulated in November 1996 and details of the implications of the GSP for developments in quality assurance.



The report recommends a 14-point action plan to increase clarity, comparability and security of standards; to strengthen academic judgement; and to progress work on threshold standards. However, the timescale for implementation varies greatly from one recommendation to another and will also depend on the political will at national and local levels and the resources, especially staff time, available.

Graduate Standards Programme Final Report

Volume 1 – The report (24pp)

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Volume 2 – Supplementary material (108pp)

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The outcomes cover the following general themes:

- **clarity and explicitness** – to improve stakeholders' understanding, the purposes of higher education and, in particular, the aims and standards of programmes of study, should be expressed more clearly and explicitly;
- **comparability** – UK degrees have become much more diverse and new ways need to be found to establish agreed bench-marks to aid comparison;
- **assessment and strengthening of academic judgement** – the tasks of assessors/examiners have become more complex and difficult so new opportunities must be created for staff to share experience to ensure consistency of assessment decisions.

Specific issues dealt with in the report cover:

- **threshold standards** – these are seen as desirable but are a longer term goal following other recommendations which will pave the way;
- **level and credit** – the definition of credits and levels needs clarification across institutions;
- **awards** – similarities and differences between awards lead to misunderstanding which a national framework would resolve;
- **the general attributes expected of graduates** – need to be clarified and elaborated within the context of particular fields, programmes and institutional missions;
- **graduate standards and Key Skills** – the GSP's focus on standards can be complemented by the introduction of Key Skills in higher education; both emphasise the need to make explicit the intended outcomes of programmes of study. This will help to map graduates' attributes

Published reports on sub-projects of the Graduate Standards Programme

(The names of the project co-ordinators are given in brackets)

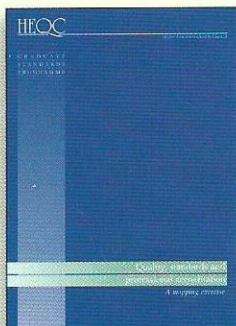


Threshold and other academic standards: the views of four subject groups

(Dr Madeleine Atkins, University of Newcastle upon Tyne)

An examination of views on standards held by representatives of English, biology, art and design, and business and management. It found that comparability of standards in curriculum content is seen as unattainable (due to the diversity of programmes) except for sub-specialisms. A small majority of participants believed that comparability could be undesirable, because it might lead to the suppression of innovation. There might, however, be scope for defining threshold standards in terms of generic attributes (both academic and employment-related). (28pp)

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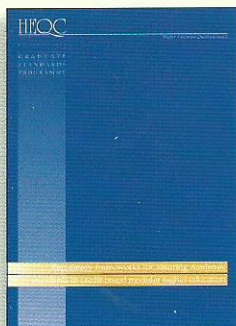


Quality, standards and professional accreditation: a mapping exercise

(Dr Alan Crispin, HEQC)

An attempt to map the approach of professional and statutory bodies to quality and standards in the higher education provision with which they are concerned. There was evidence of a tendency to focus upon input standards but with some shift towards interest in output standards. In the case of professional bodies, outcome standards referred primarily to the professional standard of fitness to practice rather than the academic standard of fitness for award. (46pp)

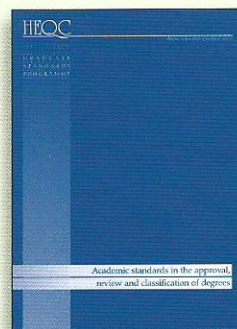
Publication code DQE231 Price £9.50 ISBN 1 85824 301 7



Regulatory frameworks for assuring academic standards in credit-based modular higher education

(Dr Norman Jackson, HEQC)

An analysis of institutional academic regulations and quality assurance policies revealed that academic standards are regulated by means of six discrete frameworks that support, guide and control practice relating to curriculum, level, award, credit, student assessment and quality management. The study discusses a number of areas where the basis for comparability of standards would be improved through the development of an integrated framework for levels-credit-awards and the development of agreed conventions and common practice in key areas. (44pp)

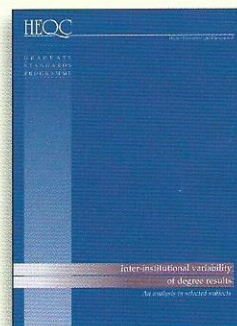


Academic standards in the approval, review and classification of degrees

(Professor John Hilbourne and Dr Robin Jackson, HEQC)

A consideration of the criteria used for determining the 'degree-worthiness' of programmes of study (English, chemistry, business studies and health care in three universities). It found that institutions tended to define procedures for validation and classification rather than criteria. Criteria were generally implicit. However, the application of explicit standards to the existing degree approval and classification system was widely thought problematic. Strict comparability of standards was seen as, at best, an ideal, although greater explicitness was more widely commended. (28pp)

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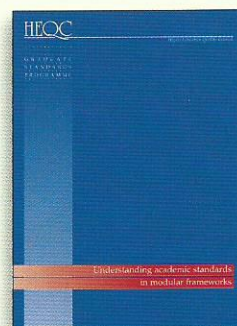


Inter-institutional variability of degree results: an analysis in selected subjects

(Professor Keith Chapman, University of Aberdeen)

A study of eight single honours subjects across pre-1992 universities between 1972-1993. It demonstrated that there was considerable variation in the pattern of degree classifications between subjects and a fairly clear trend over time for an increasing proportion of first and upper second degrees (although with substantial variations by different universities in the same subject). It was generally the case that entry qualifications exhibited a positive correlation with final classifications, though there were exceptions. (48pp)

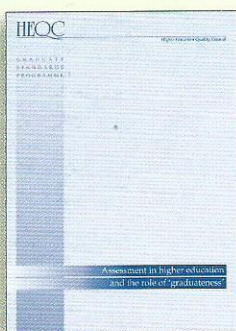
Publication code DQE233 Price £10.00 ISBN 1 85824 318 1



Understanding academic standards in modular frameworks

(Dr Norman Jackson, HEQC)

A survey of a number of higher education institutions that have adopted a modular curriculum and the approaches that they use to assure academic standards. While the report demonstrates that modularisation makes assessment more transparent, only limited evidence was found of a rationale for levels, or a clear definition of threshold standards. The report concludes with a number of recommendations relating to student assessment, regulation and the use of external examiners at institutional level. (78pp)



Assessment in higher education and the role of 'graduateness'

(Professor Alison Wolf and Professor Kathy Sylva, University of London Institute of Education; Mr Phil Jones, University of Sheffield;

Dr Richard Wakeford, University of Cambridge; Mr Andrew Harrison and Ms Julie Dockrell, consultants)

An investigation into whether there is a secure definition of a graduate across institutions or subjects or in relation to other stages of education, or whether it is only possible to define performance within levels and subjects. Changes in higher education, the report argues, are lessening the opportunities through which common understandings of standards can be formed, and may threaten the reliability of assessment. The report casts doubt on the possibility of a common threshold for all graduates, but sees scope for a subject-based approach. (32pp)

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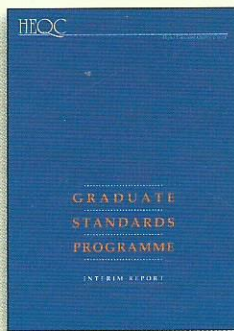


Managing flexible curricula in higher education: the architecture of modularity

(Dr Norman Jackson, HEQC)

This report provides an overview of the variety of organisational arrangements which underpin modular programmes in higher education. In so doing it highlights the management and academic issues which emerge at institution and system-wide levels when designing more flexible learning opportunities for students. (Available October 1997)

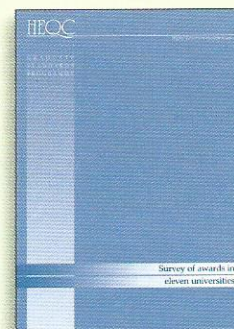
Publication code DQE246 Price £9.00 ISBN 1 85824 371 8



Graduate standards programme: interim report

A report on the first stage of the Graduate Standards Programme. Initial work on the feasibility of threshold standards as a means of better demonstrating comparability of degree standards is discussed and arguments are put forward as to why this approach proved inadequate. The report cites recent changes in higher education in the UK as necessitating a more fundamental review of existing structures and practices. This review formed the basis of the final Graduate Standards Report. (32pp)

Publication code DQE222 Price £10.00 ISBN 1 85824 255 X



Survey of awards in eleven universities

(Dr Robin Jackson and Professor John Hilbourne, HEQC)

A project mapping the range and level of awards in eleven universities. Work demonstrated the proliferation of award titles, the growing use of titles other than the generic BA/BSc, and the use of complex qualifiers to traditional titles. On postgraduate awards the project considered the recommendations of the Harris Review (1996). The project found support for greater clarity in the structuring and nomenclature of higher education awards. (40pp)

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