

Specialist Paper 11

The Academic Infrastructure and Higher Nationals : Guide for External Examiners and Centres

The Academic Infrastructure (AI) provides a means of describing academic standards in higher education provision. QAA's overview on the AI can be found at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/default.asp>

This short paper should provide clarification for centres (particularly those engaged with IQER) and also for External Examiners about how the various elements of the Academic Infrastructure relate to directly funded Higher National provision in colleges.

The principal elements of the AI are:

- The QAA *Code of Practice*
- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)
- Subject Benchmark Statements
- Programme Specifications

It is the first and last mentioned of these that most impact upon HN provision. However, centres subject to IQER will certainly be expected to be aware of all the elements of the AI.

Code of Practice

QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* can be accessed on the QAA website at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/CodeofPractice/default.asp>

The *Code of Practice* provides guidance on maintaining quality and standards for both universities and colleges which offer HE in FE. It comprises 10 sections and was originally prepared between 1998 and 2001. Revisions of individual sections began in 2004 and are ongoing.

Colleges are advised to download copies of the *Code*. Some of the sections are clearly of relevance to HEIs (eg Section 1 on *Postgraduate research programmes*). The two sections that are most immediately of relevance to FECs are Section 4 *External examining* and Section 6 *Assessment of students*, and the specific links for these sections are provided below:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section4/COP_external.pdf

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section6/COP_AOS.pdf

Each section contains precepts which should be noted by centres and taken into account when, for example, planning an assessment strategy. However, please be aware that the *Code* provides guidance, not explicit instructions!

The External examining section of the *Code* does, of course, apply across the board to both HEIs and FECs and includes expectations relating to HEI External Examiner appointments which, of course, will not apply in the case of colleges subject to the Edexcel External Examiner process.

Other sections of the *Code of Practice* which may have relevance to FECs are Sections 7, 9 and 10.

Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

The FHEQ was introduced in 2001. Higher education qualifications awarded by universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are at five levels on the Framework, in ascending order, Certificate (C), Intermediate (I), Honours (H), Masters (M) and Doctoral (D).

Details on the FHEQ are provided at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/fheq/EWNI/default.asp>

Centres should note that the FHEQ is being revised and the existing C, I, H, M and D levels are to be replaced by numeric levels 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. (These will relate to the levels on the QCF).

Higher National Diplomas, at NQF Level 5, are formally located on the FHEQ at Intermediate (I) level. However, please note that Higher National Certificates, also NQF Level 5, are **not** located on the FHEQ.

Subject Benchmark Statements

See the following link for details:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp>

Since subject benchmark statements are **only** published at Honours and Masters level, their use for centres offering Higher Nationals is limited, but will be an important consideration, as the HNC/C is often a feeder to degree programmes.

For information, though not of much HN relevance, there is a Foundation Degree qualification benchmark at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.pdf>

Programme Specifications

The QAA expectation of Programme Specifications affects all HE course teams and, in the past, confusion has occurred because, traditionally, Edexcel Higher National specifications, setting out the expectations of programme content and assessment, have often been termed programme specifications! (Hence the use here of upper case to refer to the QAA Programme Specifications).

There is a wealth of information about Programme Specifications. The QAA guidance is at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/default.asp>

In addition, a guide to preparing Programme Specifications is provided at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/guidelines06.pdf>

See also the Edexcel *Specialist Paper 4: Programme Specifications*, originally issued in 2006.

Experiences from IQER Developmental Engagements have indicated that there are still Higher Nationals in some colleges without Programme Specifications; the assumption that the Edexcel HN specification is sufficient still lingers on!

