



**Code of practice for the assurance of academic  
quality and standards in higher education**

**Section 6: Assessment of students - September 2006**

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## **Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Assessment of students**

### **Foreword**

1 This document is the second edition of a code of practice for the assessment of students in UK higher education institutions. It is one of a suite of interrelated documents which forms an overall *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* for the guidance of organisations subscribing to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and other bodies offering UK higher education.

2 The overall *Code of practice* and its 10 constituent sections were originally prepared by QAA between 1998 and 2001 in response to the Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and its Scottish Committee (the *Dearing* and *Garrick Reports*). The *Code of practice* supports the national arrangements within the UK for quality assurance in higher education. It identifies a comprehensive series of system-wide principles (precepts) covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education. It provides an authoritative reference point for institutions as they consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic quality and standards of their programmes, awards and qualifications.

3 The *Code of practice* assumes that, taking into account principles and practices agreed UK-wide, each institution has its own systems for independent verification both of its quality and standards and of the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems. In developing the *Code of practice*, extensive advice has been sought from a range of knowledgeable practitioners.

4 The *Code of practice* does not incorporate statutory requirements relating to relevant legislation, for example the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001*. It assumes that institutions have an

overriding obligation in all such cases to ensure that they meet the requirements of legislation. However, where a section of the *Code of practice* is related to legislative or similar obligations, efforts have been made to ensure compatibility between them.

5 Since 2001 a number of developments in UK higher education have encouraged QAA to begin a revision of individual sections of the *Code of practice*. In undertaking this task QAA has also decided to review the structure of the sections and, in particular, to replace the original 'precepts and guidance' format with a 'precepts and explanation' approach, using the explanations to make clear why the precepts are considered important and reducing opportunities for a 'checklist' approach to the *Code of practice*. In doing so QAA has sought to meet Recommendation 4 (part 4) of the Better Regulation Task Force in its report *Higher Education: Easing the Burden*, July 2002. This revised section has also taken account of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*.

6 Revised sections of the *Code of practice* are therefore now structured into a series of precepts and accompanying explanations. The precepts express key matters of principle that the higher education community has identified as important for the assurance of quality and academic standards. Individual institutions should be able to demonstrate they are addressing the matters tackled by the precepts effectively, through their own management and organisational processes, taking account of institutional needs, traditions, culture and decision-making. The accompanying explanations show why the precepts are important.

7 The *Code of practice* is a statement of good practice that has been endorsed by the higher education community. As such it is useful in QAA's audit and review processes that consider the extent to which an institution, in developing and implementing its own policies, has taken account of the *Code of practice* and its precepts.

8 Institutions may find the explanations useful for developing their own policy and for allowing some flexibility of practice at subject level, depending on local needs. It is important to emphasise that the explanations do not form part of QAA's expectations of institutional practice when QAA teams are conducting audits and reviews.

9 Academic staff in departments and schools do not necessarily need to be familiar with the detail of all of the various sections of the *Code of practice*, although they might well be expected to be familiar with the institutional policies it informs and any parts which are particularly relevant to their own responsibilities.

10 To assist users, the precepts are listed, without the accompanying explanations, in Appendix 1 to this section of the *Code of practice*.

11 The first version of this section of the *Code of practice* was published in May 2000. The publication of this second version follows consultation with staff in institutions, who have helped to update the *Code of practice* to take account of institutions' practical experience of using the guidance contained in its predecessor.

## **Introduction**

12 In higher education, 'assessment' describes any processes that appraise an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills. There are many different forms of assessment, serving a variety of purposes. These include:

- promoting student learning by providing the student with feedback, normally to help improve his/her performance
- evaluating student knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills
- providing a mark or grade that enables a student's performance to be established. The mark or grade may also be used to make progress decisions
- enabling the public (including employers), and higher education providers, to know that an individual has attained an appropriate level of achievement that reflects the academic standards set by the awarding institution and agreed UK norms, including the frameworks for higher education qualifications. This may include demonstrating fitness to practise or meeting other professional requirements.

13 The way in which students are assessed fundamentally affects their learning. Good assessment practice is designed to ensure that, in order to pass the module or programme, students have to demonstrate they have achieved the intended learning outcomes.

14 To test a wide range of intended learning outcomes, diversity of assessment practice between and within different subjects is to be expected and welcomed, requiring and enabling students to demonstrate their capabilities and achievements within each module or programme.

15 Students need to be aware of the purposes and implications of different assessment tasks, especially the opportunities provided for them to show the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme<sup>1</sup>. It is important that students know whether the outcomes of each assessment are to be used for formative and/or summative purposes (see below and definitions in Appendix 2).

16 Assessment is usually construed as being diagnostic, formative or summative (see definitions in Appendix 2). An assessment process can, and often does, involve more than one of these assessment purposes. For example, an assessment component submitted during a module may provide formative feedback designed to help students improve their performance in subsequent assessments. An end-of-module or end-of-programme examination or other assessment normally results in a summative judgement being made about the level the student has attained, but any feedback on it may also have an intended formative purpose that can help students in assessment later in their programme, or on another programme.

17 This section of the *Code of practice* assumes that the above statements about the nature and purpose of assessment are broadly accepted. It is not QAA's intention to prescribe how higher education providers will implement the precepts set out below, which are intended to assure good assessment practice. The accompanying explanations provide a rationale, and in some cases examples, to support the precepts. Where examples are provided, their purpose is to illustrate concepts, and sometimes to refer to what might be considered good practice, depending on the context and subject, and the students being assessed. These examples are not intended to form a checklist and were chosen to exemplify the concepts being explained. (See also paragraphs 5, 6 and 8 of the Foreword.)

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'module or programme' is used throughout the document to represent part of a programme or a programme. Part of a programme might be a group of modules/courses/units; one module/course/unit; or an element, ie a component of a module/course/unit.

18 In using this document, institutions will also need to refer to other sections of the *Code of practice*, in particular:

- *Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*
- *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*
- *Section 3: Students with disabilities*
- *Section 4: External examining*
- *Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints*
- *Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review*
- *Section 9: Placement learning*
- *Section 10: Admissions to higher education*

and also:

- *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*
- *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications.

19 Please note that this section of the *Code of practice* applies only to taught modules and programmes. The *Code, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, contains a section on the assessment of research students (precepts 22 to 24).

## Precepts and explanations

### General principles

1

As bodies responsible for the academic standards of awards made in their name, institutions have effective procedures for:

- i designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing the assessment strategies for programmes and awards
- ii implementing rigorous assessment policies and practices that ensure the standard for each award and award element is set and maintained at the appropriate level, and that student performance is properly judged against this
- iii evaluating how academic standards are maintained through assessment practice that also encourages effective learning.

In considering how their policies and practices reflect this precept, institutions may find it helpful to consider other elements of the Academic Infrastructure, ie subject benchmark statements, the frameworks for higher education qualifications and guidelines for programme specifications. Also relevant are other external guidelines relating to the subject, for example, advice provided by professional, statutory and/or regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

It is for individual institutions to determine the frequency and regularity with which evaluation of assessment practice is conducted. This might appropriately take place as part of an annual monitoring process or be integrated with internal institutional periodic review.

Ways in which institutions might wish to ensure that their practices are consistent with the above precept could include:

- making clear where in the institution responsibility lies for assuring that assessment practice supports this precept

- at subject level, evaluating the extent to which assessment tasks and associated criteria are effective in measuring student achievement of the intended learning outcomes of modules and programmes
- at subject and institutional levels, checking that assessment policies and practices remain responsive to external developments in assessment, including PSRB requirements, where appropriate
- having in place a mechanism to monitor and compare student achievement and academic standards over time
- analysing trends in results, for example, to analyse mark, grade or honours distributions, or to identify any relation between student entry qualifications and assessment outcomes.

### 2

#### **Institutions publicise<sup>2</sup> and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable.**

There are good reasons why forms of assessment vary widely. These include the need to ensure that types of assessment, including re-assessment, test the intended learning outcomes accurately and fairly, and are appropriate to the subject being studied, the mode of learning, and to the students taking the module or programme. In deciding which assessment methods to use, institutions, faculties, schools and departments may find it helpful to consider how:

- to make information and guidance on assessment clear, accurate and accessible to all staff, students, placement or practice providers, assessors and external examiners, thereby minimising the potential for inconsistency of marking practice or perceived lack of fairness
- the range and types of assessments used measure appropriately students' achievement of the knowledge, skills and understanding

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<sup>2</sup> The use of 'publicise' in this document indicates bringing policy and guidance overtly to the attention of those who need to know about it, rather than just making it available.

identified as intended learning outcomes. It is important that each assessment enables students to demonstrate the extent to which they meet the intended learning outcomes in respect of both the subject and any generic skills

- to ensure that assessment is operated fairly within programmes and for individual learners; and that assessment policies and principles are applied consistently. Showing how agreed assessment criteria, grading schemes and moderation are used at different levels or stages of a programme and to maintain academic standards may help to demonstrate fair assessment processes
- to verify that marks have been accurately recorded, in whatever form, to avoid transcription errors.

### Contribution to student learning

#### 3

#### **Institutions encourage assessment practice that promotes effective learning.**

There are numerous examples of both formative and summative assessment methods across different subjects that enable students to show the extent to which they meet the intended learning outcomes for the module or programme.

Institutions can encourage staff to make use of different assessment methods by ensuring they have access to expertise, internal and external, to support the development of assessment that focuses on student achievement. There are circumstances where students, and their teachers, need to be aware of gaps in their knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills. Intended learning outcomes and marking criteria therefore take into account requirements for attaining academic standards and for progression, where appropriate.

In some subjects there may also be a need to be fully conversant with health and safety regulations, or to meet the requirements of PSRBs. For example, in programmes where clinical competence is being judged, assessments are designed to assure the practitioner's fitness to practise and to safeguard the public.

Examples of assessment that support student learning include:

- designing a 'feedback loop' into assessment tasks so that students can apply formative feedback (from staff or peers) to improve their performance in the next assessment
- setting assessment tasks such as extended assignments that involve students researching a topic and producing work based on their research
- the use of peer assessed activities during formal teaching sessions where students, either in pairs or groups, comment constructively on one another's work. This technique enables students to understand assessment criteria and deepens their learning in several ways, including:
  - a learning from the way others have approached an assessment task (structure, content, analysis) and
  - b learning through assessing someone else's work, which encourages them to evaluate and benchmark their own performance and to improve it.

Peer assessed activities can be used in a variety of learning situations, including practical work and in large or small classes

- the use of self-reflective accounts, or other types of student self-assessment
- involving, for example, employers, patients or clients in providing part of the feedback to students on their performance
- enabling students to experience a range of assessment methods that take account of individual learning needs and, where appropriate, encouraging them to reflect on and synthesise learning from different parts of their programme. In some circumstances, synoptic assessment may help to support these aims
- where oral examinations take place, ensuring that opportunities are available for a student to practise and receive constructive feedback, and that the practise and feedback are timed to enable

students to refine their work and, if necessary, to further develop the personal skills needed to present their arguments effectively

- including students in any evaluation of assessment practices.

The emphasis in this section of the *Code of practice* is on the positive aspects of assessment and its use in supporting student learning, but it is important to mention that, in some cases, the outcome of an assessment will be the student's failure to achieve intended learning outcomes (see also above). Failure can be used positively to support student learning if accompanied by appropriate advice that enables a student to improve his/her performance.

It is important that assessment is designed to recognise student achievement, including exceptional ability. Other than in pass/fail assessments, grading criteria can be used to differentiate between students' performance.

Precept 9 below is also relevant to some of the above.

### **Assessment panels and examination boards**

**4**

**Institutions publicise and implement effective, clear and consistent policies for the membership, procedures, powers and accountability of assessment panels and boards of examiners.**

Panels and boards need to be aware of the extent of their powers and authority, including to whom they are accountable. Through access to relevant institutional guidance, they can also be assured that their decisions are in alignment with institutional and other relevant policies, procedures and processes. Panels and boards should refer appropriately to the institutional regulations that apply to the qualifications awarded. Other requirements that may need to be taken into account are those of PSRBs. Making all relevant policies, procedures, processes and regulations readily available to students and staff in appropriate and accessible language is also important.

Panels and boards should be constituted and operated with these objectives in mind. Taking the following points into account may help to achieve them.

There are often different levels and/or stages of assessment panels and boards of examiners, for instance in modular systems. Where there is more than one such panel or board, the relative powers and responsibilities of each needs to be clearly defined. For example, a departmental panel or board might have responsibility for deciding on the mark or grade a student should receive for a module assessment, and a subsequent faculty panel or board might then make a decision about how the mark affects the student's progression to the next stage of the programme, or the final result.

It is normally a requirement that external, as well as internal, assessors and/or examiners attend assessment panels or boards of examiners' meetings that consider the results of students they have assessed. It is in everyone's interests for these requirements to be made clear to and understood by all involved: assessors, examiners, chairs of panels/boards, departments, etc. It is normally considered important for any exceptional circumstances in which a requirement to attend a board would be waived in respect of either external or internal assessors/examiners to be clearly stated and made known to all concerned before a meeting. It is also important to have in place contingency arrangements that enable assessors'/examiners' views to be taken into account in their absence.

If it is also an institutional policy that one or more internal members of the institution (independent of the academic unit operating the assessment) attends the panel or board, s/he is likely to find it helpful to have clear guidance on his/her role and contribution. For example, the independent person might be present as an 'expert' on institutional policies and regulations.

Because of the potential conflicts of interest that can arise when confirming assessment decisions, members of assessment panels and boards of examiners need ample opportunities to declare any personal interest, involvement or relationship with a student being assessed.

Other points on which institutions may wish to consider giving guidance in respect of assessment panels and boards of examiners include:

- the minimum number of internal and external members who must be present for valid decisions to be taken, and what should happen if a panel or board is not quorate
- whether or not the fairness of assessment decisions would be improved by student anonymity
- what, if any, student work should be available to meetings of the assessment panels and boards of examiners
- the circumstances in which a panel or board may legitimately exercise discretion, and the extent of that discretion. Guidance at institutional level about the circumstances in which it is appropriate to exercise academic discretion is likely to contribute to assuring the consistent operation of discretion in, for example, dealing with borderline cases (see also precept 7 below), or taking into account variations in student performance during a programme. Guidance can helpfully include advice on the treatment of evidence provided about students whose assessment performance might have been adversely affected by extenuating circumstances
- the importance of keeping clear and appropriate records of the procedures and decisions of each assessment panel and board of examiners. There are several reasons why it is considered good practice to keep minutes of panels and boards, including the need for an institution to be able to assure itself that it is operating consistently within institutional policies and guidelines and taking account of programme regulations; and the value of being able to track details of decision-making, including the circumstances in which academic or other discretion is exercised, as mentioned above; the importance of complete and accurate records to inform the consideration of complaints and appeals.

(See also the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining.*)

## Conduct of assessment

### 5

#### **Institutions ensure that assessment is conducted with rigour, probity and fairness and with due regard for security.**

Clear policies and regulations covering all aspects of the conduct of assessment are key to this precept. Such guidance enables faculties, schools and departments to know how to meet the institution's requirements for assessment procedures, whilst allowing them to exercise appropriate flexibility at subject level.

For example, in the interests of fairness and maintaining academic standards, institutions will wish to achieve cross-institutional consistency in the procedures for dealing with extenuating circumstances (see precept 4 above), which are likely to be applicable to different forms of assessed material. The need to allow for some flexibility at subject level is dealt with in precept 8 below.

Statements about procedural matters relating to this precept can helpfully be included in institutional guidance that governs the conduct of assessment, including, for example:

- how and when students who need special assessment arrangements (for instance, those with dyslexia) are to be accommodated
- how invigilation is carried out, including guidance for invigilators
- how deadlines for submission of assessed work are set and met and what penalties will be applied for not meeting them
- the ways in which assessment results arising from different learning situations can be integrated appropriately with other assessment results, for example during a work placement, or when a student is returning from an exchange overseas or at another institution
- how, and for how long it is necessary, to retain assessed work.

Precept 16 below is also relevant to rigour, probity, fairness and security of assessment, together with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*; the Joint Information Systems Committee's records management policy, and QAA's *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*.

### Amount and timing of assessment

#### 6

**Institutions ensure that the amount and timing of assessment enables effective and appropriate measurement of students' achievement of intended learning outcomes.**

Deciding on the appropriate number and timing of assessment tasks is part of designing assessment that is fit for purpose. Institutions need to consider carefully how to coordinate assessment deadlines, including re-sits, especially where students are studying several subjects in parallel and/or taking joint programmes, to avoid clashes and excessive assessment burdens for students and staff. The benefits of timely formative assessment are explored elsewhere in this document (see precept 3).

Summative assessment gives students adequate opportunity to show the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes at different levels and stages. It is therefore helpful to avoid premature summative assessment and to give students enough time to mature in their learning and to synthesise knowledge. This may deepen knowledge and understanding of the subject and allow development of any personal, intellectual or practical skills that contribute to the intended learning outcomes.

In observing this precept institutions may find it helpful to consider:

- how the organisation and delivery of the curriculum, including formal teaching, are linked to opportunities for students to demonstrate the extent of their achievement of the intended learning outcomes through appropriately scheduled assessment

- how to avoid excessive amounts of summative assessment and emphasise support for student learning, especially through formative assessment
- how to ensure intended learning outcomes are assessed and that students have sufficient opportunities to show the extent to which they achieve them, while simultaneously promoting efficiency and assuring that assessment loads for students and staff are realistic and not over-burdensome
- ensuring that students have clear information about the timing of individual assessments and how they relate to one another and to the overall programme assessment, where appropriate. Checking that students taking joint or combined programmes do not experience larger amounts of assessment than those taking single subjects helps to avoid overload
- the need to ensure that students have adequate time to reflect on learning before being assessed. It is particularly important for students to have opportunities to practise skills, especially in vocational programmes involving fitness to/for practice
- reviewing the amount of time available between completion of an assessment task by a student and the date at which the results are required, either by the student or the institution, to ensure that those involved in marking student work have enough time to complete it satisfactorily. This can be particularly important in relation to final results.

### Marking and grading

**7**

**Institutions have transparent and fair mechanisms for marking and for moderating marks.**

Publicising and using clear assessment criteria and, where appropriate, marking schemes, are key factors in assuring that marking is carried out fairly and consistently across all subjects. An important principle is that students and markers are aware of and understand the

assessment criteria and/or schemes that will be used to mark each assessment task.

Precepts and explanations relating to external scrutiny and moderation of marking are included in the *Code of practice, Section 4 External examining*.

Internal moderation is important in assuring that examiners apply assessment criteria consistently, and that there is a shared understanding of the academic standards students are expected to achieve. Evidence of moderation is an important feature of internal procedures. Different methods of internal moderation are more or less appropriate for particular situations. In some circumstances, moderation may be limited to sampling a representative number of scripts from a cohort of students, perhaps with emphasis on borderline cases. In other cases, moderation may involve double, or second, marking.

Some of the factors institutions may wish to take into account in developing policies and procedures on marking and moderation include:

- how to ensure that marking and grading at faculty, school and departmental level is appropriate and comparable. Institutional-level guidance can suggest the circumstances in which it might be preferable either to give precise numerical marks or to use grades or bands of marks when assessing student work
- the need for clear guidance about how borderline marks or grades are defined and treated
- the circumstances in which anonymous marking is appropriate and when it is either not practical or inappropriate (for example in work-based assessment, or in the performing arts). Advice about where in the process anonymity ends is normally included in institutional guidance on this topic
- when double or second marking should be used and what approach should be taken, for example, whether or not the

second marker normally has access to the first marker's comments and/or marks and highlighting the importance of demonstrating that double or second marking has taken place

- the methods to be used when assessments from larger groups are sampled by internal or external examiners
- the processes governing and recording any internal moderation and verification of marks and the procedure to be followed when an internal or external moderator disagrees with the original marks
- the usefulness of undertaking an analysis of marking and marking trends to facilitate comparisons and provide evidence on standards. Some institutions may find it appropriate to incorporate such analysis in annual monitoring processes.

## 8

### **Institutions publicise and implement clear rules and regulations for progressing from one stage of a programme to another and for qualifying for an award.**

It is important that students, staff and examiners are aware of the ways in which assessment results will be used, including how they affect progression within a programme and their contribution to the overall programme outcome.

The results required to pass each stage and to progress to the next stage of a programme (where appropriate) need to be clearly stated and explained to students at the beginning of the programme. The purpose of this is to ensure that students understand the impact of individual marks on their ability to progress and ultimately to complete the programme.

In modular systems, it is important to make clear the effect that passing or failing an individual module will have on the student's eligibility to take other modules, as well as the overall implications for progression and completion.

For each taught programme or group of programmes, institutions may wish to consider putting in place fair and easily understood procedures for combining individual marks and/or grades to come to a final programme mark. These procedures will need to be transparent and easily accessible to students, staff and examiners and to have been previously evaluated by the institution to assure their reliability and validity.

Consistent approaches to progression and to combining marks for awards across an institution support the key principles of fairness to all students and maintaining academic standards. Flexibility at subject level may be appropriate, to reflect different discipline needs and marking conventions, including those in practice-based subjects. This might include allowing faculties, schools or departments to decide which assessment marks can contribute to a final degree mark. Such flexibility can often be accommodated within the overarching rules set by the institution, but where this is not possible, approval at institutional level of any variation helps to promote fairness. Consistency of treatment in the ways outlined above should enable an institution to recognise comparable levels of student achievement across disciplines in similar ways.

Guidance at institutional and programme levels that includes references to the following can support the implementation of this precept:

- the extent to which a student's overall success in a programme can include failure in part of the programme, where this is permitted by institutional rules and regulations. In modular systems, guidance can helpfully distinguish between core and optional modules and include details about any modules that must be passed to meet PSRB requirements. It is important to ensure that students receiving an award have achieved or exceeded the learning outcomes for the programme
- defining which marks contribute to the decision about whether a student receives an award

- on what basis re-takes or re-submissions can occur, making clear the number and timing permitted and the accompanying procedures; for example, re-sitting examinations; re-submitting a dissertation; repeating a work-based or other type of practical assessment; or repeating an oral examination
- the rules for deferring or not completing an assessment, together with any special assessment conditions or penalties that may apply, including any restriction on the marks, grades or levels of award that can be obtained on the basis of retaken or deferred assessments. It is helpful if such rules cover a wide range of circumstances, including any progression permitted or awards conferred because of a student's absence due to illness or other personal circumstances.

### Feedback to students on their performance

9

**Institutions provide appropriate and timely feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment.**

It is good practice to provide students with sufficient, constructive and timely feedback on their work in respect of all types of assessment. Timing is important: students benefit from feedback on their work at a time when they will be able to use it and are most likely to take notice of it, for example, during a module rather than at the end.

Institutions are already alert to the need for staff to use their time effectively while providing comments to students on their work. Concentrating staff effort on providing feedback during the learning process has the added benefit of giving students advice about how to improve their performance in time to affect their final mark.

It may be helpful to consider how different forms of feedback can be used for different purposes. For example, students are likely to find it helpful to receive constructive comments on their work from a range

of sources including teachers, personal tutors, peers and, where appropriate, practitioners. Encouraging students to reflect on their own performance, as well as receiving feedback from others, can be a useful part of the learning process, especially when opportunities for self-assessment are integrated in a module or programme.

It is also possible to provide generic feedback to students in ways that help them to improve their individual performance by learning from the cohort as a whole. For example, making available anonymously a summary of all comments provided to individual students on an assessment task set for a group can help each student to think about how his/her work could be improved, especially if the comments are clearly related to learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Another strategy that can be economical of staff time but that can provide helpful feedback to students is publishing, anonymously, assessed work at different levels showing examples of progression and staff expectations of increasing development.

In meeting the needs of students for feedback on their progression and attainment, it can be helpful to consider:

- the desirability of providing feedback at an appropriate time in the learning process (see above paragraphs), and as soon as possible after the student has completed the assessment task
- specifying the nature and extent of feedback that students can expect and whether this is to be accompanied by the return of assessed work. It is important to consider the particular needs of students studying part-time and/or remotely
- the effective use of comments on returned work, including relating feedback to intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria, in order to help students identify areas for improvement as well as commending them for achievement
- the role of oral feedback, either on a group or individual basis, as a means of supplementing or replacing written feedback

- providing guidance about the point in the module or programme where it is no longer appropriate for a member of staff to continue providing feedback to a student on his/her work. This is normally when a student is approaching a summative assessment, such as submission of a dissertation, or handing in a coursework assignment.

### Staff development and training

10

**Institutions ensure that everyone involved in the assessment of students is competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities.**

Development opportunities for staff, including those in collaborating institutions, are important and can be offered in many different formats and can be used to show that changes to assessment practice can increase the emphasis on student learning or optimise the effectiveness of staff time spent on assessing students' work. Designing assessment tasks that allow students to focus on their interests (for example offering a choice of topics or titles for an assignment), while enabling them to show they have achieved the module or programme learning outcomes, can help to fulfil both objectives.

One of the purposes of development opportunities in assessment practice provided by institutions, directly or indirectly, is to enable staff to appreciate the different requirements and purposes of formative and summative assessment. Such opportunities may cover the design of appropriate assessment tasks for evaluating different learning outcomes within different academic disciplines, taking account of some of the objectives outlined in precept 3 above.

Development opportunities can be used to:

- promote understanding of the theory and practice of assessment and its implementation in the institution. Useful development opportunities can cover effective assessment practice in the

relevant subject discipline, including exploring the different purposes of formative and summative assessment, the importance of testing intended learning outcomes and providing meaningful and timely feedback to students

- raise awareness of staff about the importance of designing assessments that minimise opportunities for plagiarism and other forms of unfair practice
- focus on competence and fitness for purpose, enabling staff to match assessment tasks appropriately to the subject and intended learning outcomes, and to share good practice within and across disciplines and institutions
- enable staff to learn about new approaches to assessment as well as the best ways to operate existing or traditional methods
- encourage staff to be aware of cultural differences and the ways in which these may affect student perceptions of assessment and their ability to perform assessment tasks successfully
- provide development on assessment practice for new staff, postgraduates involved in assessing other students, practitioners who are assessors, established staff and those with new responsibilities. This may include enabling staff to take part in activities offered by and through the Higher Education Academy, or similar organisations, and which are designed to support professional academic standards. Staff from collaborating institutions who are involved in assessing students may welcome being invited to development events
- meet the training needs of all those involved in assessment procedures and processes, and might cover: interpretation of regulations; chairing assessment meetings; and record-keeping at assessment panels and boards where appropriate. Staff from collaborating institutions who are involved in assessing students may welcome being invited to training and development events.

## Language of study and assessment<sup>3</sup>

11

**The languages used in teaching and assessment are normally the same. If, for any reason, this is not possible, institutions ensure that their academic standards are not consequently put at risk.**

Institutions that permit assessment in languages other than those in which they ordinarily work need to be confident that they can assure the academic standards of the awards made in their name. Circumstances in which institutions might permit assessment to be conducted in a language(s) other than that used for teaching and study include educational partnerships or collaborative programmes, particularly those involved with overseas provision. These circumstances may include those where British Sign Language is used.

*The Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* also covers this topic in the Introduction, under the heading 'Language of study and assessment'.

In anticipation of receiving requests from students for assessment to be undertaken in a language not used for teaching, institutions may find it helpful to publish clear criteria for evaluating such cases. Such criteria should include guidance about the time at which requests can be made. Where requests are granted, it is important to mention this on the student's transcript.

Important factors to take into account in setting criteria are ensuring that staff involved in teaching and assessing students have the necessary subject knowledge and expertise in the relevant language(s); and identifying and appointing suitable external examiners. Guidance should also cover institutional policy on whether reference tools like dictionaries are permitted in examinations.

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<sup>3</sup> This precept does not apply to higher education institutions subject to the requirements of the Welsh Language Act (1993) for whom the *Guidelines for higher education institutions in Wales for effective practice in examining and assessing in a language other than the language of tuition* (QAA 038 2003) provide more appropriate guidance.

It is also a priority to ensure that students are not disadvantaged or advantaged by the potential need to translate assessed work. It is best to avoid translation wherever possible. Where it is necessary, mechanisms are required to assure the reliability and validity of the assessment outcome.

### **Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' requirements**

**12**

**Institutions provide clear information to staff and students about specific assessment outcomes or other criteria that must be met to fulfil the requirements of PSRBs.**

Students benefit from access to clear information, available in a range of media, including web-based materials, to enhance accessibility to the requirements of the PSRBs that accredit their qualifications (see also precept 8 above).

Applicants and students need to receive as soon as possible information about how PSRB accreditation affects any programmes for which they are applying or are registered. Facts they may need to know include the exact terms on which the accreditation is based including, where appropriate, the modules that must be passed, and at what levels, to meet the requirements of the relevant PSRB. If an institution is in the process of seeking accreditation from a PSRB, applicants and students registered on relevant programmes should be aware of this. Students and applicants should also be informed about the outcome of such accreditation proposals.

The *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*, is also relevant to this precept.

It is necessary to alert overseas applicants as soon as possible to any relevant aspects of PSRB accreditation. For example, the programme may only accredit a student to practise in the UK, or be subject to other PSRB conditions, for example, where practice is related to different professional, legal or political situations.

Where appropriate, applicants and students may find it helpful to be made aware of relevant contacts in PSRBs whom they can approach for further information about questions such as the volume of accredited work needed and length of time it may take before accreditation takes place. Students should also be advised when direct contact is inappropriate.

Institutions may also find it helpful to encourage PSRBs to be aware of relevant higher education reference points, such as this section of the *Code of practice*.

Where work-based learning is part of the accredited programme, it is important that individual students are aware of who will be assessing their work during the placement and, where appropriate, how those marks will contribute to their overall result. Further references to the assessment of placement learning can be found in the *Code of practice, Section 9: Placement learning*.

Institutions can help prospective students by anticipating the requirements applicants may need to meet to fulfil an accrediting body's criteria, and its possible expectations after graduating from an accredited programme.

### Assessment regulations

13

**Institutions review and amend assessment regulations periodically, as appropriate, to assure themselves that the regulations remain fit for purpose.**

Good practice in assessment reflects subject and educational needs. As and when these change, it is desirable to verify that related assessment remains appropriate through review processes that are appropriate to the institution and context. For example, a change in the way in which a programme is structured or delivered may make it appropriate to shift the balance between formative and summative assessment. Changes to the external environment, for example, new

legislation or changing professional practice, are also likely to prompt review of assessment regulations. In either case, there may be a need to review regulations or guidelines to ensure that they support the maintenance of academic standards and promote fairness for individual students. The involvement of as wide a range of people as possible in reviewing assessment regulations may help to assure their appropriateness, especially when major changes are likely.

Factors that institutions may wish to take into account in this context include:

- when it is appropriate to review assessment regulations; what circumstances normally activate a review; who in the institution is responsible for reviewing such regulations; and what procedures are usually adopted
- the need to ensure that proposed changes are discussed with staff, students, external examiners and any relevant PSRB; and to determine how consultation will occur.

When deciding on the timescale for enacting any changes to assessment regulations, institutions may find it helpful to consider the impact of changes on current students and whether such changes should apply to those students already registered on the programmes affected. Clarity for students is essential. Changes should normally be of benefit to students, or neutral, but where a new regulation may be to the detriment of existing students care should be taken to minimise the impact.

### **Student conduct in assessment**

**14**

**Institutions encourage students to adopt good academic conduct in respect of assessment and seek to ensure they are aware of their responsibilities.**

Students find it helpful to receive information and guidance about their responsibilities as active participants in assessment. This could include, for example:

- making sure that students are informed of the consequences of academic misconduct. It is important that procedures are applied consistently across an institution, to avoid the possibility of students in different departments or schools being treated differently for similar contraventions of rules covering cheating. The effects on students of academic misconduct may necessarily be harsher in some disciplines than others, for example, in programmes involving fitness to practice
- accepted and acceptable forms of academic referencing and citation and advice which promotes good academic practice, for example, making clear the need to avoid any suspicion of plagiarism
- the measures that can be taken to prevent fraudulent activities, including impersonation and the submission of work that is not that of the student. For example, institutions should put in place administrative procedures to prevent cheating in formal examinations and also may find it helpful to design assessments to reduce opportunities for cheating
- definitions of academic misconduct in respect of assessment (and the related penalties incurred), such as any form of cheating, including plagiarism, collusion, impersonation and the use of inadmissible material (including any material that breaches confidentiality, or that is downloaded from electronic sources without appropriate acknowledgement).

### **Recording, documenting and communicating assessment decisions**

**15**

**Institutions ensure that assessment decisions are recorded and documented accurately and systematically and that the decisions of relevant assessment panels and examination boards are communicated as quickly as possible.**

Everyone involved in the assessment process needs to know how, when and where results will be made available. It is particularly

important that students are aware of who will provide them with results and how and when this will occur. The processes for communicating assessment decisions therefore need to be clear and unequivocal and students should know whom to contact if they need clarification of their results.

For purposes of accuracy and fairness, institutions may find it helpful to provide:

- clear statements of the responsibilities of all those involved in computation, checking and recording of assessment decisions
- systems for back-up when using electronic storage or transmission of assessment data
- clear policies on access to information on assessment judgements about individuals.

When disclosing assessment results to students, it is helpful to have clear guidance about whether the result is final, or whether it is subject to confirmation by an assessment panel or examination board whose decision may include input from an external examiner. Where provisional results are provided for students, it is important that they are not in any doubt about the standing of the results and, if they are not final, how and when they will be ratified.

It is therefore important that all concerned in the assessment process, especially the student, are aware of the different stages of the process and that results may be provisional if released before formal approval by the relevant committee.

Institutions should take data protection and other relevant legislation into account in framing their policies on the publication or withholding of students' results.

## **Appendix 1**

### **The precepts**

#### **General principles**

**1**

**As bodies responsible for the academic standards of awards made in their name, institutions have effective procedures for:**

- i designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing the assessment strategies for programmes and awards**
- ii implementing rigorous assessment policies and practices that ensure the standard for each award and award element is set and maintained at the appropriate level, and that student performance is properly judged against this**
- iii evaluating how academic standards are maintained through assessment practice that also encourages effective learning.**

**2**

**Institutions publicise<sup>4</sup> and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable.**

#### **Contribution to student learning**

**3**

**Institutions encourage assessment practice that promotes effective learning.**

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<sup>4</sup> The use of 'publicise' in this document indicates bringing policy and guidance overtly to the attention of those who need to know about it, rather than just making it available

### **Assessment panels and examination boards**

**4**

Institutions publicise and implement effective, clear and consistent policies for the membership, procedures, powers and accountability of assessment panels and boards of examiners.

### **Conduct of assessment**

**5**

Institutions ensure that assessment is conducted with rigour, probity and fairness and with due regard for security.

### **Amount and timing of assessment**

**6**

Institutions ensure that the amount and timing of assessment enables effective and appropriate measurement of students' achievement of intended learning outcomes.

### **Marking and grading**

**7**

Institutions have transparent and fair mechanisms for marking and for moderating marks.

**8**

Institutions publicise and implement clear rules and regulations for progressing from one stage of a programme to another and for qualifying for an award.

### **Feedback to students on their performance**

**9**

Institutions provide appropriate and timely feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment.

### **Staff development and training**

**10**

**Institutions ensure that everyone involved in the assessment of students is competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities.**

### **Language of study and assessment<sup>5</sup>**

**11**

**The languages used in teaching and assessment are normally the same. If, for any reason, this is not possible, institutions ensure that their academic standards are not consequently put at risk.**

### **Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies' requirements**

**12**

**Institutions provide clear information to staff and students about specific assessment outcomes or other criteria that must be met to fulfil the requirements of PSRBs.**

### **Assessment regulations**

**13**

**Institutions review and amend assessment regulations periodically, as appropriate, to assure themselves that the regulations remain fit for purpose.**

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<sup>5</sup> This precept does not apply to higher education institutions subject to the requirements of the Welsh Language Act (1993), for whom the *Guidelines for higher education institutions in Wales for effective practice in examining and assessing in a language other than the language of tuition* (QAA 038 2003) provide more appropriate guidance.

### **Student conduct in assessment**

**14**

**Institutions encourage students to adopt good academic conduct in respect of assessment and seek to ensure they are aware of their responsibilities.**

### **Recording, documenting and communicating assessment decisions**

**15**

**Institutions ensure that assessment decisions are recorded and documented accurately and systematically and that the decisions of relevant assessment panels and examination boards are communicated as quickly as possible.**

## **Appendix 2**

### **Definitions of terms<sup>6</sup>**

**Anonymous marking:** The identity of students is not revealed to markers and/or to the assessment panel or examination board. There may be a point towards the end of the assessment process where anonymity ends.

**Assessment criteria:** Based on the intended learning outcomes for the work being assessed, the knowledge, understanding and skills markers expect a student to display in the assessment task and which are taken into account in marking the work.

**Award:** A qualification or certificated credit conferred upon a student who has achieved the intended learning outcomes and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set by an institution for the award. Awards may be divided into modules, units or elements at various levels and with different volumes of study, each of which has attached to it intended learning outcomes and academic standards to be achieved by students in order to receive the final award.

**Diagnostic assessment** is used to show a learner's preparedness for a module or programme and identifies, for the learner and the teacher, any strengths and potential gaps in knowledge, understanding and skills expected at the start of the programme, or other possible problems. Particular strengths may lead to a formal consideration of accreditation of prior learning.

**Double/second marking** (also referred to as 'internal verification'): Student work is independently assessed by more than one marker. Each marker normally keeps a record of all marks awarded, together with his/her rationale for awarding each mark. In some cases, second markers have the first marker's comments and/or marks/grades. Where this is not the case, the use of marking sheets or similar

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<sup>6</sup>These definitions apply to the above terms as they have been used in this section of the *Code of practice*. They are not intended to be authoritative, and may not necessarily apply in other circumstances or documents.

procedures for written work is sometimes used to ensure that the marks given by the first marker do not influence the second marker's judgement. Markers' notes enable discussions to take place, after initial marking, about the reasons for individuals' decisions if there is a significant difference between the markers' judgements. It is useful to define 'significant' in this respect.

**Formative assessment** has a developmental purpose and is designed to help learners learn more effectively by giving them feedback on their performance and on how it can be improved and/or maintained. Reflective practice by students sometimes contributes to formative assessment.

**Grade descriptors** encapsulate a level of achievement in relation to bands of marks. For individual assignments they indicate how well the assessment criteria have been met; for award classifications they indicate the level of achievement across a programme of study as a whole.

**Marking scheme:** A detailed framework for assigning marks, where a specific number of marks is given to individual components of the answer.

**Model answer:** The assessor's explicit view of what an answer to an assessment task should contain. Model answers are more commonly used where the right answer can be defined precisely.

**Moderation:** A process intended to assure that an assessment outcome is fair and reliable and that assessment criteria have been applied consistently. Forms of moderation include:

- sampling, either by an internal or external examiner
- additional marking, for example of borderlines, firsts and fails, or where there is significant difference between the marks of different markers that cannot be resolved without the opinion of another marker

- review of marks: where there is a significant difference between several assessment marks, within or between parts of a programme, which indicate the marks may need to be reconsidered

**Publicise:** Making information available in an accessible format and actively bringing it to the attention of those who need to know it.

**Sampling** is most commonly used in the process of moderation (see above). It normally involves internal or external examiners scrutinising a sample of work from a student cohort. Sampling may be based on the desirability of checking borderline marks of any kind, or to test that assessment criteria have been applied consistently across the assessment of students in the cohort.

**Summative assessment** is used to indicate the extent of a learner's success in meeting the assessment criteria used to gauge the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme.

**Synoptic assessment:** An assessment that encourages students to combine elements of their learning from different parts of a programme and to show their accumulated knowledge and understanding of a topic or subject area. A synoptic assessment normally enables students to show their ability to integrate and apply their skills, knowledge and understanding with breadth and depth in the subject. It can help to test a student's capability of applying the knowledge and understanding gained in one part of a programme to increase their understanding in other parts of the programme, or across the programme as a whole.

**Appendix 3**  
**Membership of the working group for the Code of practice,**  
**Section 6: Assessment of students**

Dr Colin Beeson	Vice Principal, Royal Northern College of Music
Professor David Boud	Professor of Adult Education, University of Technology, Sydney
Professor Mary Carswell	Dean, Faculty of Business, Computing and Law, University of Derby
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Simon Felton	General Secretary, National Postgraduate Committee
Professor Peter Main	Director, Education & Science, Institute of Physics
Professor George McDonald Ross	Director, Philosophy and Religious Studies Subject Centre, Higher Education Academy
David Parry	Clerk to the Governors, Southampton Solent University
Professor Jonathan Sandy	Department of Oral and Dental Science, University of Bristol
Brian Salter	Deputy College Secretary and Academic Registrar, King's College London
Professor Steve Trevillion	Head of Social Work Education, General Social Care Council
Dr Clive Turner	Higher Education Development Manager, City College Norwich

## Assessment of students

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Helen Wenman	General Social Care Council
Helen Bowles	Standing Conference of Principals
Gerard Madill	Universities Scotland
Greg Wade	Universities UK
Janet Bohrer	Development Officer, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Gill Clarke	Assistant Director, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and Director, Teaching Support Unit, University of Bristol

## **Appendix 4**

### **List of reference documents that have informed the revisions to the *Code of practice***

*Outcomes from institutional audit, Assessment of students*,  
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, QAA 097 01/06,  
January 2006

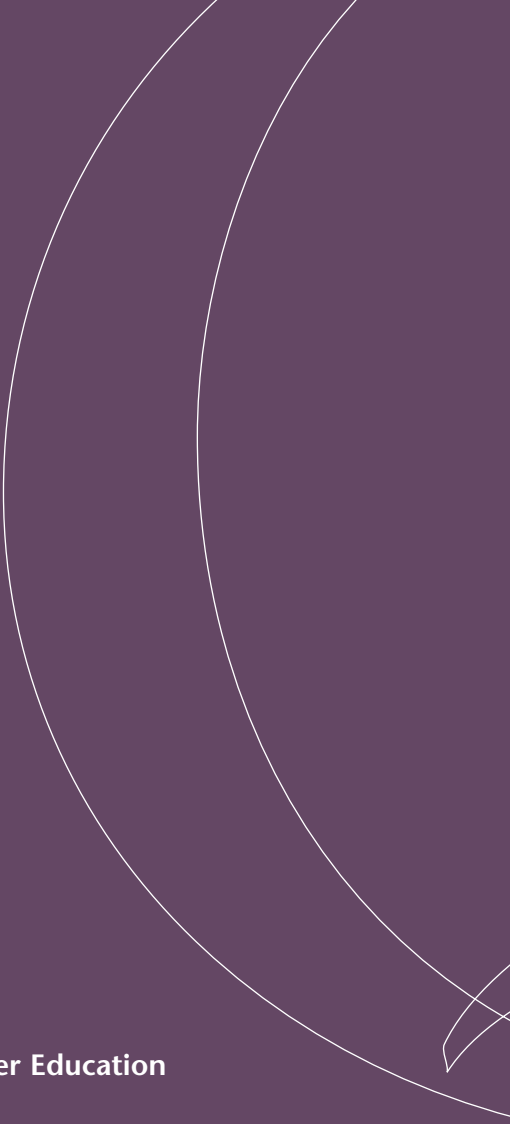
*Managing Assessment: Student and Staff Perspectives*, Managing  
Effective Student Assessment benchmarking club, Higher Education  
Academy reference ASS097, 2 June 2005

*Enhancing practice - Assessment*, Professor David Lines, The Robert  
Gordon University and Dr Colin Mason, University of St Andrews,  
QAA 079 05/05, May 2005

*Enhancing practice - Reflections on Assessment*, Volumes I and II,  
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, QAA 081 05/05  
and QAA 082 05/05, May 2005

*Enhancing student learning through effective formative feedback*,  
SENLEF project team, Higher Education Academy reference ASS096,  
7 June 2004

*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher  
Education Area*, March 2005 [www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso](http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso)



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