

Writing Programme Specifications

What is a Programme Specification?

The Dearing Report¹ stressed 'the importance of clear and explicit information for students so that they can make informed choices about their studies and the levels they are aiming to achieve'. The report recommended that clear descriptions of programmes should be developed which identify potential stopping-off points and describe the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:

- the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;
- key skills such as communication, numeracy, the use of IT and learning how to learn;
- cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;
- subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills.

As a consequence of this recommendation the QAA recommended that institutions produce Programme Specifications for all programmes. Programme Specifications should provide a source of useful information for students, professional bodies, employers, external examiners and academic reviewers. They should be written for single and joint honours, interdisciplinary and multi disciplinary programmes.

A Programme Specification is a concise description of the learning outcomes from a programme. The means by which these outcomes are achieved, (i.e. teaching and learning methods) and demonstrated (i.e. assessment) should be included. Any features that make the programme unique or distinctive should also be included. The Programme Specification should make clear how the different components of the course are related to each other and to the final qualification.

The QAA does not require Programme Specifications to be presented in a particular style. They may be presented as free text or in a template format. Formats may be developed across an institution or within a department.

However, the QAA suggest that all Programme Specifications should contain the following common information:

- awarding body or institution
- institution at which the programme is delivered
- accreditation by professional body
- name of final award
- programme title
- UCAS code
- aims of the programme
- reference points used to inform programme outcomes (e.g. subject benchmark statements)
- programme outcomes: knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes
- teaching, learning and assessment strategies
- programme structure; levels, modules, credits, awards
- date of Programme Specification

Additional information may be included:

- admission criteria
- assessment regulations
- indicators of quality
- learning support
- methods for evaluation and improving standards and quality

Briefing papers are designed to provide a condensed discussion on issues and topics related to teaching and learning in the physical sciences. Each guide focuses on a particular aspect of higher education and is written by an academic experienced in that field.

Points to Remember

Programme Specification should be comprehensible and useful to a lay audience such as a student or employer. Although staff may have used complex mapping in order to produce programme outcomes that reflect the outcomes of individual modules, the final programme specification itself should be a clear description of the course that will help to inform student choice.

Module outcomes are related to the curriculum, learning methods and assessment criteria. Although the Programme Specification can show how these modules aggregate to form the programme, the final outcomes should be more than the sum of the parts. Consequently, the Programme Specification should show the attributes which are developed by the course as a whole.

Writing Programme Specifications should be an academic rather than administrative activity and should provide a course team with the opportunity to reflect on module and programme design.

Questions to ask

What do we want our students to achieve?

This may include knowledge, skills, competencies and values. Think about what makes your programme distinctive, what the content concentrates on, which intellectual skills are developed, which practical skills, what will students be able to understand, what they will be able to do... etc.

How do we show that what our students achieve has professional currency?

Use reference points such as benchmark statements, requirements of professional bodies, institutional statements on key skills, etc.

How do we use benchmark statements?

Benchmark statements provide a useful starting point when reviewing courses and can be useful reference points against which specifications can be justified. However, they are not intended to be draft Programme Specifications despite the temptation to use them as such.

How do our students achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes?

Learning and assessment methods should be appropriate for the outcome being developed and assessed. For example knowledge and understanding may be developed through lectures, tutorials, directed reading, and assessed via unseen examinations, assignments etc. Key skills may be developed and assessed through projects, group assignments, problem solving workshops etc and may be assessed via assignments, project reports, presentations etc. Practical skills will be developed through practice in a laboratory or work placement and assessment may be via demonstration of a skill or by providing evidence of having done so.

Where can more information be found?

The QAA publication 'Guidelines for Preparing Programme Specifications' provides clear, useful advice. It also includes several Programme Specifications written for different subjects and different types of courses. Look on their website at: <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programspec>>

References

1. The Dearing Report
<www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe>

UK Physical Sciences Centre
Department of Chemistry
University of Hull
Hull HU6 7RX

Phone: 01482 465418
Fax: 01482 465418
E-mail: psc@hull.ac.uk
www.heacademy.ac.uk/physsci

