

Higher Education Code of Practice

Introduction

This Appendix sets out the quality assurance environment for Honours Degree and Graduate Diploma programmes, established under the auspices of the Probation Qualifications Assurance Board (the 'Assurance Board').

The Assurance Board, acting on behalf of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), has a duty to scrutinise and report on the quality of higher education qualifications provided by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including the curricula and content of individual programmes, and to make recommendations for improvement as and where appropriate.

The mechanisms and principles identified here reflect the procedures used by professional bodies and external quality assurance bodies with an interest in higher education provision. They acknowledge that each HEI has its own internal programme approval and quality assurance procedures for its own purposes which have to be complied with. They are designed to complement these, enabling HEIs to account for their provision and their compliance with this Code of Practice to the Assurance Board without generating unnecessary or excessive bureaucratic burdens.

Likewise, in the course of undertaking its scrutiny work, the Assurance Board also has a duty to monitor the extent to which the provisions of the Regulatory Framework are being met; it will, if appropriate, report on areas of non-compliance and make relevant recommendations to the NOMS Director of HR. However, the Assurance Board does not have a business management mandate, nor does it have the power to intervene directly on contractual matters.

Nevertheless, whilst on-going scrutiny of programme quality by NOMS will take place primarily through the Assurance Board, the extent to which providers meet these expectations will also be a material factor taken in to account when NOMS reviews contracts and takes decisions about possible extensions of them.

The Assurance Board will publish separately details of the practical arrangements for its scrutiny of provision by HEIs. Additionally, HEIs will be informed directly by the NOMS HR Directorate of the arrangements for the monitoring of contractual arrangements as these do not form part of this Code of Practice.

Quality Assurance Processes expected of Higher Education Institutions

This section sets out the expectations of the Assurance Board, with respect to the quality assurance of programmes commissioned from HEIs. In this it is principally concerned with those aspects of the design, content, delivery and effectiveness of programmes that are the responsibility of the contracted HEIs, and whether or not programmes are meeting the needs of learners, employers and NOMS alike.

Programme design

The core curricula for both the Community Justice Honours Degree and the Graduate Diploma are specified by NOMS. However, these specifications do not provide detailed teaching schemes to be followed prescriptively. Programme design remains the responsibility of the HEIs. They will need to demonstrate how teaching, learning and assessment arrangements are organised effectively to ensure that learners are able to achieve the outcomes of the core curricula. The skills, experience and creativity of teachers need to be harnessed to ensure that the programme is stimulating, engaging and that it inspires an enthusiasm for learning and for a professional career in providing probation services.

The Assurance Board will want to satisfy itself that the design of learning programmes provided by HEIs is satisfactory by taking into account four straightforward considerations:

- Are the intended **learning outcomes**, which the learner must achieve, described clearly and set appropriately in relation to the core curriculum specified by NOMS and to the needs of employment as a Probation Officer?
- Are there effective **learning opportunities**, provided by the structure of the learning programme, learning resources and blend of teaching modes, which will enable the reasonably assiduous learner to achieve those outcomes?
- Is **assessment** designed so as to enable the learner to demonstrate achievement of the outcomes?
- Are there adequate staff and other **resources** to enable intended learning outcomes to be achieved?

In addition to meeting the requirements of the core curricula, each HEI will need also to demonstrate, through its internal approval procedures, that the intended learning outcomes match the relevant level descriptor of the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. The core curricula requirements for the Honours Degree (final year) and for the Graduate Diploma are designed to reflect, and be consistent with the relevant descriptor. The level descriptors of the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications provide a broad indication of the relative demand, complexity and depth of study involved in gaining a qualification.

Programme content

The content as well as the design of programmes should be effective in enabling the learner to achieve the intended learning outcomes. HEIs should be able to demonstrate how each outcome is supported by the programme content necessary to develop understanding and the acquisition of knowledge, and by the opportunities to develop practical skills and abilities.

In considering whether the content and design of programmes is appropriate and effective, the following factors will be taken into account by the Assurance Board:

- **Level:** the relative demand, complexity, depth of study and learner autonomy involved in the programme. The level of the final year of the honours degree, and of the graduate diploma, is set at the honours level of the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications.
- **Coherence:** the overall coherence and intellectual integrity of the programme. Programme design should ensure that the learning experience has a logic and integrity that are linked clearly to the overall purpose of the programme. It should be clear how each module or unit contributes to the overall aim of producing a competent and effective Probation Officer.
- **Balance:** the balance between the main elements of the programme; particularly between substantive knowledge and practical skills, between the development of behaviours and abilities relevant to employment generally and the development of the specific ethical behaviours required of Probation Officers, and between breadth and depth of subject material.
- **Progression:** the way in which the design and content of the programme promotes an organised progression, such that the demands on the learner in terms of intellectual challenge, acquisition of skills, complexity of knowledge, the capacity for conceptualisation and the ability to manage their own learning increase over time.

Programme content and design should be informed by current developments in probation practice, current scholarship and research in community justice and related fields, and by developments in teaching and learning techniques. It should also take account of the personal development of wider attributes that are required for success in employment, such as team working, communication and leadership skills, and of the ethical behaviours and inter-personal skills that are particular to practice as a Probation Officer.

Teaching and learning

Effective teaching is at the heart of a successful programme. A programme may look marvellous on paper, but it is teaching and learner support that brings it to life.

In scrutinising programmes, the Assurance Board will want to consider:

- How effective teaching and learning are.
- How well teaching is supported by the availability of appropriate resources.
- How well learners achieve.
- How well learners are provided with information about their programme, about the support that is available to them and about expectations that are placed upon them as they progress through their programme.
- How well learners are guided and supported.

The Assurance Board will also form a judgement of the overall effectiveness of provision and related services, and of what steps each HEI is intending to take to improve the provision further.

Assessment

The purpose of assessment is to demonstrate where learning has been successful, and where learning has yet to be successful and what further work may be required. In its scrutiny of assessment provision in programmes the Assurance Board will be seeking satisfactory evidence that assessments are:

- **Valid:** the assessment method selected is appropriate to the learning outcome being assessed.
- **Reliable:** assessment is consistent as between candidates and over time. The processes of verification, moderation and second marking can all play an important role in ensuring consistency of assessment decisions.
- **Sufficient:** the assessments between them must cover all significant intended learning outcomes.
- **Verified:** a sample of all assessments should be reviewed by external examiners, to ensure that assessment criteria are being applied consistently, and there is no bias or other improper influence.
- **Secure:** there are safeguards against plagiarism or other forms of 'cheating'.

The Assurance Board will also want to see satisfactory evidence that information relating to assessments is clearly communicated to learners, practice tutors/mentors, line managers and other appropriate parties, including information on:

- Assessment schemes/programmes.
- Marking/grading schemes.
- Assessment/marking criteria in individual assessments.
- Refer/re-sit arrangements.
- Appeals procedures.
- Provision for initial, diagnostic and specialist assessments for those with specific needs.

Programme approval, monitoring and review

The key instrument in assuring standards and quality is a robust set of processes for programme approval, monitoring and review. Programme approval, monitoring and review constitute a cycle that enables an HEI to assure the quality of its educational provision, to effect continuous improvement, and to ensure that all provision remains fit for purpose. The Assurance Board will wish to satisfy itself when reviewing an HEI's provision, that the HEI has robust systems in place – including effective leadership and management - to ensure that a programme, once approved, will remain fit for purpose.

Scrutiny by the Assurance Board

The Assurance Board will publish separately details of the practical arrangements for its scrutiny of provision by HEIs. They will be based on a cycle of annual reporting and planning for improvements in quality by each HEI.