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UNIVERSITY ABERDEEN

GUIDE TO ACADEMIC QUALITY PROCEDURES

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This guide has been designed to provide an outline of the University's academic quality assurance procedures, to enable the reader to decide what procedure is appropriate for what purpose, and to guide the reader to the most appropriate source for further information. Staff are also encouraged to consult, in the first instance, with their [Academic Quality Officer](#) for advice and guidance.

The [Academic Quality Handbook](#), alongside the [Organisational Regulations](#) and [Academic Regulations](#), serves as a key constituent of the University's quality assurance framework, defining and providing detailed operational guidance on the University's quality assurance procedures. The three main components include:

- Course/Programme Validation – a process whereby all new courses/programmes are subject to formal consideration and approval prior to implementation;
- Annual Appraisal – a process whereby the delivery of all courses/programmes and output standards achieved are monitored;
- Institution-Led Subject Review – a process conducted on a 5/6 yearly basis which consists of two major elements i.e. the critical review of the subject and its development, and the formal re-approval of the associated course portfolio.

Other sections of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#) refer to: Academic Collaboration, External Examiners, and Research Degrees.

Fundamental to the effective operation of all the quality assurance procedures are the University's committees, the remits and compositions of which are contained in the [Organisational Regulations](#). The most senior of these are the Board of Governors and Academic Council, the latter assuming responsibility on behalf of the Board of Governors for the overall planning, development and supervision of the academic work of the University. In addition, it is responsible for maintaining the academic standards of the University.

The [Committee Structure Diagram](#) illustrates the organisation of Standing and Sub-Committees which report upwards to both the Board of Governors and Academic Council, several of which have key roles in overseeing the development and implementation of the University's quality assurance framework and in monitoring quality and standards.

Complementing the committee structure is a scheme of delegated executive authority for approving/implementing transactional activity associated with the University's quality assurance procedures. The key post holders in this respect are:

- the Principal in his role as Chair of Academic Council;
- Deputy Principal and Chief Academic Officer in his role as Convener of both the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) and Academic Development Committee (ADC);
- Head of the Graduate School in his role as Convener of the Research Degrees Committee (RDC).

Further details of executive roles and responsibilities are available from the University's [Management Structure Diagram](#).

Operational support for quality assurance is provided to the academic Schools of the University by the [Department for Governance and Academic Quality](#). The Graduate School oversees research degree provision, in liaison with the Department for Governance and Academic Quality. In addition, the [Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Access \(DELTA\)](#) plays a key role in supporting the quality enhancement of the University's provision.

The University's focus for quality enhancement is the holistic student experience, and effective engagement with students is integral to the University's approach to the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning. More detailed information is provided on the [Student Representation and Partnership](#) area in *CampusMoodle*. In summary, this student engagement includes, *inter alia*:

- engagement and collaboration with the RGU Union;
- *Student Experience Questionnaires*;
- staff/student engagement/partnership liaison arrangements at course/programme level;
- support for Student Representatives;
- student representation on Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) and Research Degrees Internal Review (RDIR) panels;
- student representation on most of the University's key committees;
- annual meetings of the Principal and Deputy Principal and Chief Academic Officer with Student Representatives.

The [Academic Regulations](#) apply to all educational provision offered by the University that bears academic credit, and provide the regulatory framework for the academic processes of the University. They are structured as follows:

A1: Courses

A2: Admission

A3: Student Conduct and Appeals

A4: Assessment and Recommendations of Assessment Boards

A5: External Examiners

A6: Research Degrees

A7: Higher Doctorates

A8: Honorary Awards

The remainder of this guide is structured to mirror the sections of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

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This guide is also available, with hyperlinks to relevant documents and webpages at www.rgu.ac.uk/qualityguide.

1 MODULE, COURSE AND PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENTS

Section 1 of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

1.1 Introduction

All of the University's course provision is designed using the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), which means its awards are described in terms of SCQF levels and SCQF credits. A full description of the SCQF may be found at its website [www.scqf.org.uk] and its application to the University's awards is prescribed in [Academic Regulation A1: Courses](#).

The University defines a *course* as the approved curriculum followed by an individual student that leads to a named award and/or the achievement of academic credit. In some instances, courses are grouped into a *programme* to act as a suite of routes with a high degree of commonality, or as a framework for course administration and management.

This section of the *Academic Quality Handbook* provides details of the *Validation Procedure*, whether this is for the purpose of approving new, or substantial amendments to existing, credit-rated provision, and offers guidance on each of the stages of the procedure and other issues to consider during the process.

It also provides the procedures to be followed to approve and amend modules and credit-rated short courses, as well as credit-rated academic provision specific to a corporate client.

As a significant proportion of the University's provision is recognised/accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), procedures are also incorporated for managing PSRB accreditation whether or not this includes a visit.

In producing this section of the Handbook due cognisance has been taken of the relevant chapters of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#).

1.2 Validation Procedure

The approval of new courses and programmes, or of substantial amendments to existing courses or programmes, involves two stages. Before the Validation Procedure is initiated for a new course/programme, the proposal requires to be approved by the Academic Development Committee (ADC). Thereafter, validation is the process through which the University assures itself of the quality and standards of its course/programme provision prior to implementation and delivery, or approves substantial changes to existing course/programme provision, where this affects more than 25% of an individual award's SCQF credit.

The Validation Panel is asked to examine the standards and quality of the proposed course in: an academic sense; in the context of external employer requirements, and in the context of an increasingly global and international marketplace. With this in mind, the Validation Panel is asked to consider, in particular:

- admission requirements;
- course/programme aims and outcomes;

- structure and content of the course/programme;
- teaching and learning approaches;
- assessment arrangements and methodologies;
- organisation and management;
- how the course ensures graduate employability.

Key aspects of the Validation Procedure include:

- the completion of a Planning Sheet for the validation;
- the preparation of documentation, drafted in accordance with the University's requirements, e.g. *Contextual Overview*, *Course Specification*, *Module Descriptors* etc.;
- consultation between the Course/Programme Leader, the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Access (DELTA) and Academic Quality Officer (AQO) in preparing the documentation;
- authorisation, by the Assistant Chief Academic Officer, for the release of the documentation to the Panel, after internal scrutiny and approval of the documentation by a Documentation Scrutineer (normally the AQO) in liaison with the Head of School;
- validation to occur in accordance with a timescale agreed by the Academic Development Committee. This timescale would vary depending on the nature of the proposal; for example, whether the course proposal met a pre-identified, bespoke market or whether extensive marketing following validation would be required;
- the preparation, by the School, of a response to the validation outcomes that is subject to the subsequent approval by the Assistant Chief Academic Officer (ACAO) and Convener of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC).

1.3 Amendments to Existing Provision

Approval for changes to existing courses/programmes is undertaken at two levels:

- (i) The Academic Development Committee (ADC) is required to approve amendments to existing courses/programmes if these amendments involve any or all of the following:
 - changes to an existing course/programme title;
 - additions/changes to mode(s) of delivery;
 - changes to named exit awards;
 - additional intakes and changes to intake timing;
 - changes to duration of course;
 - proposals for re-developments to the course/programme curriculum affecting more than 25% of an award's SCQF credit value (e.g. learning outcomes). Where proposals are to be considered as part of the Institution-Led Subject Review Course Re-approval process, ADC approval is not required (except for changes to award titles and modes of delivery). ADC's role is to manage the course portfolio between Institution-Led Subject Review;
 - course/programme cessations.

- (ii) School Academic Boards have devolved authority to approve amendments affecting less than or equal to 25% of an award's SCQF credit value (e.g. for an undergraduate four-stage Honours course, up to and including 120 of the total 480 SCQF credits). Course/Programme Management Teams are required to consider course/programme changes prior to submitting these to the School Academic Board. Thereafter, executive action by the AOO, is taken to confirm completeness of paperwork. Changes proposed might include:
- changes affecting progression;
 - inclusion of new and/or revised modules (i.e. module titles, SCQF level/credit);
 - replacement of modules with other existing, or new, modules;
 - alteration to the timing of delivery of existing modules;
 - changes to assessment.

The timing of implementation of changes requires careful consideration with respect to the recruitment cycle and to prospectus and web-based recruitment material. Where changes are made that will impact on students in a live recruitment cycle, students will need to be informed by Admissions of changes so they make an informed choice about whether to pursue study at the University.

In making changes to existing courses, as well as creating new modules and credit-rated short courses it is essential that current students and External Examiners are kept informed of proposed and approved changes.

1.4 Module Approval

Modules may be used in the following ways:

- as constituent units of credit-rated award-bearing courses and programmes;
- as credit-rated non-award-bearing short courses typically offered as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision or fulfilling the University's commitment to the lifelong learning agenda;
- as credit-rated non-award-bearing short courses offered in collaboration with a third party (refer to Section 5 of this Handbook).

Modules delivered as part of a credit-rated award-bearing course or programme can normally only be credit-rated with 15 SCQF points at the appropriately defined level, or multiples thereof, unless otherwise required by a PSRB or a corporate client. Modules offered as credit-rated non-award-bearing short courses can normally be credit-rated with 5, 10 or 15 SCQF points at the appropriately defined level.

All modules are contained within, and prepared using, the *Module Database*, which automatically generates *Module Descriptors*. The Department for Governance and Academic Quality administers the *Module Database* and advice on its use should be sought from the Department.

Unless modules are approved during a validation (or as part of the Course Re-approval element of Institution-Led Subject Review), new and amended modules require approval by the School Academic Board with further scrutiny of paperwork by the AOO. The key aspects of this process include:

- the preparation of proposed changes by the Course/Programme Leader and consideration of these changes by an external subject expert;
- consultation with the External Examiners and students if assessment or progression requirements are affected;
- consideration by the Course/Programme Management Team and School Academic Board prior to its subsequent consideration by the AOO.

1.5 Credit-Rated Short Course Approval

The procedure for approving modules to be delivered as credit-rated non-award-bearing short courses is the same as for the approval of new modules. Approval allows credit-rating for future delivery only; credit cannot be awarded retrospectively.

Short courses derived from existing approved modules that have not been amended are not subject to any further formal approval. However, any variances in the standard fee would require endorsement by the Head of School.

1.6 Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) Accreditation

A significant proportion of the University's courses are [affiliated to PSRBs](#) and are therefore subject to accreditation/re-accreditation by the relevant bodies. The organisation and management of accreditation visits and/or a documentary submission (usually where no visit is required) is included within the University's quality assurance procedures to ensure appropriate oversight and monitoring. To a great extent, the format of PSRB visits is dictated by the individual body. The Course Leader should consult with the AOO well in advance of any PSRB submission/visit regarding requirements for oversight and monitoring by the University.

Key aspects are likely to include:

- the completion of a Planning Sheet;
- the preparation of documentation, drafted in accordance with both the PSRB and University requirements, e.g. *Course Specifications, Module Descriptors* etc.;
- authorisation, by the ACAO, for the release of the documentation to the PSRB, after appropriate internal scrutiny and approval of the documentation by a Documentation Scrutineer;
- the preparation by the School of a response, as appropriate, to the accreditation outcomes that is subject to the subsequent approval by the ACAO prior to issue to the PSRB.

Details of PSRB accreditations and affiliations are held within the *Course Information Database* and a summary of these is available from the [Department for Governance and Academic Quality's website](#).

2 ANNUAL APPRAISAL PROCESS

Section 2 of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

The *Annual Appraisal* of teaching and the broader learning experience is central to the University's quality assurance processes. It enables the University to ensure its subject provision, comprising the portfolio of modules, courses and programmes, remains in good health and that it will satisfy the criteria for any review by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or any other external body. *Annual Appraisal* is a process whereby the delivery of all courses and programmes and output standards achieved are monitored. It is also designed to encourage the identification and dissemination of enhancement activities and to facilitate the provision of good quality feedback to students on an ongoing basis.

The process is informed by a number of key sources including: feedback from students obtained through staff/student engagement/partnership liaison meetings and through feedback received from the *National Student Survey* (NSS), *Student Experience Questionnaire* (SEQ) and *External Examiner Annual Reports*, as well as performance indicator data produced by the University. Reflecting on the aforementioned sources, Course/Programme Management Teams complete the appraisal of all courses and produce an *Annual Course Appraisal Report*. Once complete, the School Academic Board (SAB) is required to produce a *School Academic Board Appraisal Report* which is subsequently considered by the Convener of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) at a meeting with the Head of School, the Assistant Chief Academic Officer (CAAO) and the relevant Academic Quality Officer (AQO). Following this meeting, the Academic Quality Officer, produces a summary report for each School which is submitted to QAEC. The associated *School Academic Board Appraisal Reports* are also made available for consideration by QAEC.

Student-Facing Services prepare a *Student-Facing Support Services Appraisal Report*, which include an executive summary, including any areas for development, and key actions arising from the appraisal. These reports are considered by the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee (LISC) which, in turn, submits a summary report to QAEC. The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee (TLASC) also considers pertinent issues, including those arising from student feedback, and reports appropriately to QAEC.

The evidence gathered during this process is used to inform, incrementally, the programme of Institution-Led Subject Reviews and to satisfy the requirements of external bodies such as the QAA.

In producing this section of the Handbook due cognisance has been taken of relevant chapters of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#).

3 INSTITUTION-LED SUBJECT REVIEW

Section 3 of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

The Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) activity focuses on taught provision and does not include evaluation of the research student experience, which is reviewed by a separate process focused on the Graduate School (refer to [Section 6](#) of the Handbook). ILSR does include a linkage to research through consideration of how curricula are kept up to-date, reflecting advancing knowledge and professional practice in the subject. This would typically include linkages to staff scholarship and research activities. The key points would be impacts of staff scholarship and research on curricula, and hence graduate attributes, not on the staff research activities themselves.

Institution-Led Subject Review is the University's process to formally review subject provision and plan future enhancement of its taught provision leading to academic awards. Subject provision is classified, in part, as per the [QAA Subject Benchmark Statements](#). It is implemented on a School basis, although makes provision for differing organisational structures across the University, normally to a six yearly cycle (including the course re-approval element). A single Review event normally incorporates all of the eligible subjects at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels hosted by a School.

The process considers both standards and quality, and combines assurance and enhancement, with a view of 'enhancement' as being concerned with:

- making, or doing it better;
- making the best of opportunities and resources;
- any aspect of teaching, learning, assessment or the student learning experience;
- change, doing the same things better, or doing new, better things.

Enhancement should be guided by the following questions:

- where are we now?
- where do we want to be in the future?
- how are we going to get there?
- how will we know when we get there?

The Review is intended to be a structured process to ask and answer these questions. The answers should emerge, and be developed progressively through the process, including dialogue with the Review Panel, and following the Review Report. The Panel will engage in a consultancy type dialogue with the School about the School's self-evaluation and its ambitions and priorities for the future.

The process is based on evaluation and reflection considering:

- analysis of the key outcomes from past internal quality assurance processes (in particular Annual Appraisal);
- a range of internal and external reference points on strategy, standards and quality;
- future contexts, ambitions and priorities.

Outcomes from the Review inform School-level planning and the associated formal re-approval of the subject course and module portfolio. Outcomes will be also reported to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, Academic Council and the Board of Governors. In addition, the Board of Governors is required to endorse an annual statement relating to *Institution-Led Review of Quality* for submission to the Scottish Funding Council.

Following the Review, there is a three-year Interim Review to monitor progress.

In producing this section of the Handbook due cognisance has been taken of relevant chapters of the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*, notably [Chapter B8 Programme Monitoring And Review](#).

4 EXTERNAL EXAMINER ARRANGEMENTS

Section 4 of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

The appointment of External Examiners is one of the most important features of the University's system of quality assurance. The function of the External Examiner is crucial to all aspects of the assessment process and his/her presence ensures the objectivity of an Assessment Board, comparability of awards and standards in the national context, and the fair and equitable treatment of students.

The remit of the External Examiner extends to all assessments that contribute to the award of academic credit (reference [Academic Regulation A5: External Examiners](#)). In producing this section of the Handbook, and in drafting [Academic Regulation A5: External Examiners](#), due cognisance has been taken of the [UK Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining](#).

5 ACADEMIC COLLABORATION

Section 5 of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

5.1 Introduction

The following section covers arrangements whereby the University collaborates with a third party in the delivery of credit/award bearing taught provision.

Collaborative arrangements for award bearing taught provision are agreed on the basis of individual courses, programmes or short courses. The Academic Development Committee (ADC) of the University has overall responsibility for approving these arrangements.

In drafting this section of the Handbook, due cognisance has been taken of relevant chapters of the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#).

A formal broad exploration of collaborative possibilities under the auspices of a Memorandum of Understanding may precede the development of a specific academic collaborative partnership. The process for development and approval of a Memorandum of Understanding can be found on the main Academic Quality Handbook page together with all the forms that are referred to in this section: www.rgu.ac.uk/qualityhandbook.

5.2 General Principles of Academic Collaboration

All academic collaborations are subject to approval, monitoring and review. The approval of academic collaborations essentially involves two stages, initial approval and formal approval:

- Initial approval involves approval in principle by the Academic Development Committee (ADC) or by a panel in accordance with the [Collaboration Opportunities Process](#).
- Formal approval is in accordance with the principles outlined in [Section 1: Module, Course and Programme Developments](#).

Monitoring and review follows the principles, and as closely as possible, the procedures used for all University courses [see [Section 2: Annual Appraisal](#), [Section 3: Institution-Led Subject Review](#) and [Section 4: External Examiner Arrangements](#) of this Handbook].

Where a decision is taken to cease an academic collaboration, cessation procedures will be in accordance with [Section 1](#) of this Handbook, together with formal notice to the delivery or partner institution in accordance with the terms of any contractual agreements.

Regardless of the type of collaboration, the University will retain effective control over all information, publicity, promotional activity and standards relating to programmes and awards for which it has responsibility. This will include:

- all recruitment or advertising proposed by a delivery or partner institution or organisation in advance of formal approval, which must indicate that the collaborative arrangement has still to be approved/validated;
- any material produced by a collaborating institution using the University's name and/or logo, for which prior approval from the Vice-Principal for Commercial and Regional Innovation will be obtained.

A *Contract of Collaboration* will be produced by the University and signed by both parties before any collaborative provision can be delivered. The *Contract of Collaboration* will be produced by Commercial Operations Support in liaison with the Head of School, the Finance Department, the Academic Quality Officer and the University Solicitor. Where the Contract relates to a non-ERASMUS student exchange, this will be produced by the University Solicitor. The *Contract of Collaboration* will set out the responsibilities and duties of each partner, specifying *inter alia* and where applicable:

- financial arrangements;
- course entry requirements;
- approval of staff appointments;
- arrangements relating to the implementation of the University's Academic Regulations;
- External Examiner arrangements and responsibility for payment of Examiners' fees and expenses;
- arrangements for course monitoring and review;
- any issues relating to accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies;
- information to be included on student transcripts (in order to ensure full compliance with the QAA Quality Code); and
- contract review date.

For overseas collaborations the University also requires the partner institution or organisation to secure written confirmation that the implementation of the course has the approval of the government or appropriate authority of the country concerned, and to confirm annually through the [Link Coordinator](#), that any changes to legislation do not affect the status of the agreement.

Normally, the University will not consider entering into collaborative arrangements where delivery and/or assessment is in a language other than English. Where exceptions to this are made, the

Contract of Collaboration will clearly state what arrangements the University requires in order to be assured that the learning experience and achievements of students are of an appropriate standard. Associated costs, for example for translation work, would be borne by the partner institution or organisation.

5.3 Types of Academic Collaboration

The University recognises the following forms of academic collaboration for award bearing taught provision:

Validated Course

A validated course is a whole course/programme, or part of a course/programme, designed, delivered and assessed by the staff of the partner institution or organisation and which is approved and overseen by the University.

Award of Credit for External Provision

Award of credit for external provision is a form of collaboration between the University and an external provider (such as an employer, a professional body or a non-degree awarding college) which involves, initially, the University credit-rating the provider's provision and thereafter maintaining oversight of the assessment standards achieved and confirmation of the award of credit by the University.

Student Exchange Study Period

A student exchange study period is where a student enrolled on a University course undertakes a period of study outside the United Kingdom of no more than one year which is credited as a contribution to the course award.

Articulation Agreement

An articulation agreement is a formal agreement entitling a student who has satisfactorily completed a specified programme at a partner organisation to enter directly into a subsequent stage of a specified course at the University.

Joint Award

The University has the provision to collaborate with one or more partner institutions or organisations with degree-awarding powers to jointly design and/or deliver and/or assess a course/programme leading to a single award. Such joint arrangements would be subject to mutually agreed and clearly defined quality assurance processes based on those of the University and the partner institution or organisation.

Dual Award

A dual award is where a programme of study is provided by the University together with one or more other awarding bodies, leading to separate awards and certificates being granted by all the awarding bodies involved. Each awarding body is responsible for their own award; however, the dual award provides an integrated educational experience. If a student only meets the requirements for one of the awarding bodies, they will only receive one award. An example of a dual award arrangement is where a student undertakes study abroad for a year as part of their University degree award and also receives an award for the year's study by the study abroad host.

The University may seek to engage in collaborations customised to particular circumstances which do not fall exactly within the definitions provided above. In such cases, the general principles outlined in this section of the Academic Quality Handbook would be applied, including appropriate customisation of documents and quality assurance processes.

6 RESEARCH DEGREES

Section 6 of the [Academic Quality Handbook](#).

Responsibility for the implementation of quality assurance and enhancement relating to research degrees has been delegated to the University's Research Degrees Committee by Academic Council. Administrative support to this Committee is provided by the Graduate School.

The Graduate School provides operational support for the University's quality assurance procedures and processes for research degrees, also referred to as the University's [Code of Practice](#) in liaison with the Department for Governance and Academic Quality.

In addition to this section of the *Academic Quality Handbook*, it is recommended the following University [Academic Regulations](#) are consulted:

[Regulation A6: Research Degrees](#)

[Regulation A4: Assessment and Recommendations of Assessment Boards](#) (for particular reference to the *Postgraduate Certificate (PgCert) Research Methods*)

[Regulation A3 – Section 2: Student Misconduct Procedure](#)

[Complaints Handling Procedure](#)

In producing this section of the *Handbook* due cognisance has been taken of [Chapter B11: Research Degrees](#) of the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*.

If you have any queries on the contents of this document a member of staff from the Department for Governance and Academic Quality will be happy to assist you.

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Useful web addresses

Governance and Academic Quality - www.rgu.ac.uk/governanceacademicquality

DELTA - www.rgu.ac.uk/delta

Student Representation and Partnership - www.rgu.ac.uk/studentinvolve

Advance HE (formerly the Higher Education Academy) - www.advance-he.ac.uk

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) - www.qaa.ac.uk

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland - www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland

UK Quality Code for Higher Education - www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code

Quality Enhancement Themes - www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) - www.scqf.org.uk

Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) - www.sparqs.ac.uk

The Graduate School - www.rgu.ac.uk/research/graduate-school

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