University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee - Friday 18 February 2011

Review of Continuing Validity of Programmes of Study

Ms Jane McAllister, Senate Office

Introduction and background

The University of Glasgow underwent an Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) in October and November 2009. The report of the review was published in April 2010 and the outcomes and actions arising from it have since been considered by Senior Officers of the University and various committees. An action plan has been developed to co-ordinate these actions with others arising from the Learning and Teaching Strategy, Internationalisation Strategy, the recommendations of the Graduate Attributes Working Group and the Retention Action Plan.

The following comment arising from the ELIR report and regarding the University's processes for monitoring the continuing validity of programmes has been directed to the Senate Office to be considered in consultation with Academic Standards Committee.

Paragraph 94 of the ELIR Report states:

> "The procedure for programme approval effectively permits a programme to be run indefinitely, and the University is explicit that the DPTLA is not a reapproval or revalidation event for the programme(s) under review. The DPTLA reports, while very detailed and comprehensive in a number of respects, often lack a specific and explicit evaluation of the continuing validity and relevance of the programmes under review. The University is encouraged to review the alignment of the DPTLA process with regard to *Section 7* of the *Code of Practice*, in order to ensure greater prominence and consistency in how such matters are considered, and reported."

Note: The Departmental Programmes of Teaching Learning and Assessment (DPTLA) review process was re-named Periodic Subject Review (PSR) in 2010 as a result of University restructuring and the change from departments to subject areas. The process itself was not changed in any significant way.

The QAA Code of Practice

Section 7 of the QAA *Code of Practice* concerns Programme design, approval, monitoring and review. It was revised in September 2006. It sets out a number of precepts of which 7 and 8 refer to the continuing validity of programmes [Precepts 7 and 8 and the associated explanations are attached as Annex 1]:

Precept 7: Institutions routinely monitor (in an agreed cycle) the effectiveness of their programmes:

- to ensure that programmes remain current and valid in light of developing knowledge in the discipline, and practice in its application;
- to evaluate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes are being attained by students;

- to evaluate the continuing effectiveness of the curriculum and of assessment in relation to the intended learning outcomes;
- to ensure that recommendations for appropriate actions are followed up to remedy any identified shortcomings.

Precept 8: Institutions periodically undertake a broader review of the continuing validity and relevance of programmes offered.

The University's current approach

The University's guidance on Periodic Subject Review (PSR) [relevant extracts from the guidance are attached in Annex 2] states that the aims of PSR are to provide support to the Subject/School in evaluating and enhancing taught provision through, among other things, an evaluation of the "currency and validity of each programme in the light of developing knowledge within the discipline, and the application of that knowledge in practice". This aspect of PSR aligns directly with precepts 7 and 8 of the Code of Practice and is embedded within an overall process that is well aligned with the Code in general. This periodic review is supported by the more frequent monitoring of programmes and courses carried out through the University's Annual Monitoring process, which also aligns well with the Code.

In detail, the evaluation of the currency and validity of the programmes under review is carried out mainly by the External Subject Specialist member of the Review Panel, who has relevant expertise in the subject and knowledge of it in the wider context. The External Subject Specialist is specifically asked to explore and comment on the consistency and appropriateness of the programme aims and curricula in relation to:

- relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements;
- other external reference points (e.g. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), Professional and Statutory Bodies (PSBs), where appropriate); and
- the developing knowledge within the discipline and the application of that knowledge in practice.

In order to enable such evaluations to be made, the following documents are among those provided to the PSR Panels, for the particular attention of the External Subject Specialist:

- Subject information provided for students (e.g. Handbooks for courses and programmes, School/Subject Handbooks, etc);
- Programme specifications for all taught programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate) for which the School/Subject is responsible;
- Relevant subject benchmark statements.

It is accepted that the outcomes of the reviews, the Review Reports, do not normally contain *explicit* statements regarding the Panel's evaluation of the continuing validity and relevance of the programmes under review. However, any concerns raised by the External Subject Specialist related to the validity of programmes that remain outstanding after discussions with the Subject Area are dealt with in the Review Report. These would normally result in a recommendation, for example: that the subject area reviews and amends the programme in question through the appropriate programme change processes. The University would ensure that this was followed through via the monitoring of recommendations carried out by Academic Standards Committee. Where no concerns are raised, there is no prompt to include the External Subject Specialist's conclusions regarding the continuing validity of the programmes in the structure of the Review Report. This could be addressed by adding a new section or sub-section to the standard report structure. The section could begin with a

basic statement that "The Review Panel, guided by the views of the External Subject Specialist, confirms that the programmes offered by the School/Subject Area remain current and valid in light of developing knowledge in the discipline, and practice in its application" and be expanded, where appropriate, with further detail including notes on good practice.

(This approach has been adopted by several other institutions, including the University of Exeter[1] who received a similar comment in their 2004 Institutional Review.)

The way forward

ASC is **asked to consider and confirm its view** on the following:

1. Is the University's Periodic Subject Review process broadly aligned with Precept 7/8 of the QAA code of practice Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review?

2. Is the process currently in place for monitoring the continuing validity of programmes through Periodic Subject Review sufficient?

3. Should the University's Guidance on Periodic Subject Review be amended to give further prominence to this aspect of review?

4. Should the format of PSR Reports be adjusted to include an explicit statement regarding the conclusions of the Panel's evaluation of the programmes currency and validity in light of developing knowledge in the discipline, and practice in its application?

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[1] Executive summaries of periodic subject review reports from the University of Exeter are available from: http://as.exeter.ac.uk/support/admin/staff/qualityassuranceandmonitoring/periodicsubjectreview/executivesummaries/

Excerpts of the QAA Code of Practice Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review

Precept 7

Institutions routinely monitor (in an agreed cycle) the effectiveness of their programmes:

- to ensure that programmes remain current and valid in light of developing knowledge in the discipline, and practice in its application
- to evaluate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes are being attained by students
- to evaluate the continuing effectiveness of the curriculum and of assessment in relation to the intended learning outcomes
- to ensure that recommendations for appropriate actions are followed up to remedy any identified shortcomings.

Explanations

Routine monitoring of programmes is important; it allows providers to consider the effectiveness of the programme in achieving its stated aims, and the success of students in attaining the intended learning outcomes. It is a process to which an element of proportionality and risk analysis may be applied, with institutions making informed decisions about the kind of process that will be appropriate. Routine monitoring activity, which will often be the responsibility of people who appraise their own performance at the end of each academic year, may consider, for example:

- external examiners' reports
- any reports from accrediting or other external bodies
- staff and student feedback
- feedback from former students and their employers
- student progress and other relevant data
- material available to students such as programme specifications, student handbooks and websites.

Effective and prompt follow-up of any recommendations made will protect the interests of current students and should also allow any staff and resource development needs to be addressed.

Precept 8

Institutions periodically undertake a broader review of the continuing validity and relevance of programmes offered.

Explanations

The timing and nature of reviews will depend on a number of factors, including the rate of development of knowledge and practice in the discipline, the extent to which wider questions of overall aims are dealt with in routine monitoring, and overall institutional policy on such reviews. It is important to remember the concept of continuous evaluation; evaluation processes are not carried out in isolation from one another or from other institutional priorities.

Periodic review assesses the continuing validity and relevance of the programme in the light of, for example, the following:

- the effect of changes, including those which are cumulative and those made over time, to the design and operation of the programme
- the continuing availability of staff and physical resources
- current research and practice in the application of knowledge in the relevant discipline(s), technological advances, and developments in teaching and learning
- changes to external points of reference, such as subject benchmark statements, relevant PSRB requirements
- changes in student demand, employer expectations and employment opportunities
- data relating to student progression and achievement, including that available on the Teaching Quality Information website
- student feedback, including the National Student Survey.

Excerpts from University of Glasgow Guidance on Periodic Subject Review

2.3   The aims of the PSR review are to provide support to the Subject/School in evaluating and enhancing its taught provision through:

a)   An evaluation of:

- the relevance of programme aims and intended learning outcomes for each programme to each other and to the overall aims of the Subject's provision;
- the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment methods in meeting the intended learning outcomes for each programme;
- the correlation of provision with the relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and other elements of the QAA's 'academic infrastructure';
- the currency and validity of each programme in the light of developing knowledge within the discipline, and the application of that knowledge in practice;
- the effectiveness of the measures in place to assure the quality of provision and maintain standards;
- recent and proposed enhancements to the quality of the student learning experience in taught provision;
- the effectiveness of how the Subject/School engages students in developing teaching, learning and assessment practice.

b)   A discussion with the Subject/School, its staff, students and stakeholders on:

- the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and learning resources;
- the Subject/School's approach to the enhancement of provision, including recent developments and future plans;
- the quality of the student learning experience, and ways in which it might be enhanced;
- ways of promoting student motivation and effective learning.

2.4   The outcome of the PSR review will be a report containing:

- an evaluation of the quality of the provision under review;
- an evaluation of the Subject/School's procedures for assuring the standards of awards and the quality of provision;
- an evaluation of the Subject/School's approach to the enhancement of the student learning experience in taught provision;
- an evaluation of how effectively the Subject/School engages with students in developing teaching, learning and assessment practice, including preparation for the PSR process;
- the identification of good practices for dissemination across the University, as appropriate;
- recommendations for action to address any identified weaknesses and to further strengthen provision and thereby further enhance the provision of teaching, learning and assessment.

**6	Role of Panel Members**

External Subject Specialists

6.2	External subject specialists will concentrate on the subject provision and have a specific role in exploring and commenting on:
- the extent to which the Self Evaluation Report is evaluative and constructively self-critical;
- the relevance of programme aims to the overall aims of the Subject/School's provision and the relevance of the intended learning outcomes for each programme to the aims of that programme;
- the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment practices in meeting the intended learning outcomes of courses and programmes;
- the consistency and appropriateness of the programme aims and curricula in relation to:
- relevant QAA Subject Benchmark Statements;
- other external reference points (e.g. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), Professional and Statutory Bodies (PSBs), where appropriate);
- the developing knowledge within the discipline and the application of that knowledge in practice;
- reflect on any aspects of the programmes that might be considered instances of good practice in a national or international context;
- the appropriateness of the Subject/School's mechanisms for assuring the standards of awards.

**7	Review of Documentation**

7.3	The external subject specialists will have a key role in programme review aspects, in particular: (a) reviewing the programmes in the light of relevant national subject benchmark statements and other external reference points, including the requirements of any relevant Professional and Statutory Bodies, where relevant; and (b) the appropriateness of the School/Subject's mechanisms for assuring the standards of awards.

From the Guidance on Writing the Self-Evaluation Report

3.4 Curriculum Design, Development and Content

This section should explain the School's approach to curriculum design, development and content. It should evaluate the effectiveness of the organisation of the curricula in promoting student learning and in achieving the ILOs of the degree programmes. The following are aspects which the Subject/School will wish to comment on in this section.

- Do the design and content of the curricula encourage achievement of the ILOs in terms of knowledge and understanding, cognitive skills, subject specific skills (including practical/professional skills), transferable skills, progression to employment and/or further study, and personal development?
- How does the Subject/School ensure academic and intellectual progression within the curriculum? How are courses integrated both within and between levels of study?
- How have the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, the SCQF and employers informed curriculum design?
- To what extent have personal transferable skills been developed within the programme(s) e.g.: IT skills, writing skills, team working, presentation skills,

communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving? How are these skills developed progressively through related courses, and through different levels?

- In what ways does the Subject/School foster an enquiry led learning approach in its students?
- What evidence is there that curricular content and design are informed by current research and scholarship, by recent developments in teaching and learning techniques, and by any changes in relevant occupational or professional requirements? Providing recent examples would be helpful;
- To what extent have national and international developments, in particular, influenced subject development? How does the subject development compare with similar practice in other countries? Has the curriculum changed in the light of feedback from international students and or staff?