Universities
UK

Framework for programme reviews

Executive summary

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There is a strong interest from students, the Office for Students (OfS) and government in England about the quality and value of courses. While the overwhelming majority of courses are high-quality and good value, concerns need to be identified and addressed by universities.

The current context

The regulator in England is focused on tackling outliers, courses deemed 'low quality', with proposals that set out minimum requirements for students' progression to professional employment or postgraduate study.

It is in universities' interests to address perceptions of low-quality courses. However, regulation and funding based on narrow graduate outcome measures will harm the ability of universities to support levelling up, improve social mobility and deliver student choice.

What do students think?

While students and recent graduates view employment outcomes as important, they also have a broader view of the value and quality of courses. They put a strong emphasis on the importance of high-quality teaching and feedback.

The majority of students and recent graduates (79%) agree that the government should do more to advocate for the wider benefits of a degree.

How are quality and value checked?

Regulators and funders already monitor how universities meet quality measures around course design, and there is a robust quality assurance system that safeguards standards. Beyond this, all universities look carefully at the performance of their courses through internal processes.

As autonomous institutions, it is up to individual universities to decide how best to carry out their internal checks. However, there is an opportunity for the sector to improve consistency and transparency of internal programme review processes and give more consideration to the value that courses provide. Within our framework, we define 'programmes' as a course or set of courses which form a unit that can be subject to meaningful review.

How this framework helps

We've worked with our members to develop this good practice framework for programme review processes in England. The framework aims to build on the work already undertaken by universities in reviewing courses and bringing more consistency. It aims to strengthen how universities ensure that all courses provide good value and outcomes for students, while meeting the changing needs of employers and the economy.

We're committing to supporting our member institutions in England to put in place the guidance set out in the framework to make processes more transparent and consistent. The framework and our commitment in this area has been approved by the Universities UK (UUK) board.

Aims of the framework

The framework will:

- Support our members in England in their annual programme review processes, with a focus on delivering high-value and high-quality sustainable courses.

- Demonstrate universities' commitment to consistency and transparency in programme review processes and give confidence to stakeholders that the sector is regulating itself in this area.

- Set out an approach where universities in England can include graduate outcomes and wider measures of value into annual reviews of courses, while maximising contributions to levelling up, improving social mobility, and meeting the needs of students, employers, and local areas.

- Provide a tool to create a shared understanding of what is meant by low-quality and low value courses which is meaningful to stakeholders – including students, universities, employers, government, and the general public.

How this framework works

The framework has three key sections that universities in England are encouraged to integrate into their programme review processes:

1. Principles

We're setting out high level principles to inform programme and course reviews. They cover how metrics (standard measures of value and quality) are used in monitoring, assessing where action should be taken and improving transparency in how universities approach reviews.

2. Measures

We're providing a toolkit of measures to use in monitoring the value of programmes and courses. These include core measures that universities in England are encouraged to integrate into their annual programme review processes, covering student and graduate views, student outcomes and graduate prospects.

The toolkit also provides guidance on considering the wider value of courses. It aligns with key priorities, including:

- levelling up and improving life chances across the UK
- provision of skills
- supporting economic growth nationally and locally
- contributing to social responsibility.

3. Transparency

We're asking universities in England to publish statements on their websites by early 2023 – covering approaches taken in annual monitoring, and processes for assessment of where action should be taken on low value courses.

How we will help

To check the feasibility of putting this framework into place, we carried out a pilot exercise with a broad mix of universities in autumn 2021. All the universities involved were able to put the framework in place, but said that further support would be helpful.

These universities also found the framework useful in developing approaches to programme reviews, in particular principles for use of metrics, and saw value in reflecting the wider benefits of higher education in review processes.

As part of our commitment to supporting our members in England to put the guidance in place, we will:

- Support members to embed the principles set out in this framework, including encouraging integrating metrics into annual programme and course review processes.

- Share best practice in a way that encourages collaboration, but avoids competition between institutions, by establishing a forum on using data to inform programme review processes.

- Work with stakeholders to consider how using data and qualitative contextual information can reflect changing student, graduate, and government views of the value of higher education courses and evolve the types of programmes offered. For example, the growth of degree apprenticeships, part-time study and development of lifelong learning.

- Carry out an evaluation of how well the framework works, including use of institutional transparency statements, which will be published in early 2023.

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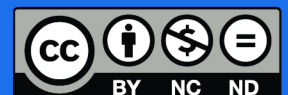universities in England, Scotland, Wales and
Northern Ireland.

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UK universities to be the best in the world;
maximising their positive impact locally, nationally
and globally.

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