**Benchmarking against internal and external reference points**

1. **Introduction to internal and external reference points**

Staff, panels and committees with responsibility for consideration, approval and review (annually or periodically) of courses and modules have to be satisfied that they align with both internal and external reference points. These reference points include the University’s strategic plans and external requirements set by the [Office for Students](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/) (OfS) as a regulator and any accrediting bodies for the provision, or guidance from bodies such as the [Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code).

In recommending a course to be approved for the first time, or to continue to be offered, we have to be assured that we have confidence:

* in the continuing validity and relevance of the stated aims and intended learning outcomes of the courses, in accordance with relevant internal and external reference points
* that the award(s) conferred by the University are of an equivalent standard to comparable awards throughout the UK, and that UK threshold standards set reflect applicable sector-recognised standards

The tables below set out the internal and external reference points which apply, how they are considered and their impact on course and module design and approval.

**Sector-recognised standards**

OfS [conditions of registration](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/084f719f-5344-4717-a71b-a7ea00b9f53f/quality-and-standards-conditions.pdf) require that for all awards:

* any standards set appropriately reflect any applicable [sector-recognised standards](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/53821cbf-5779-4380-bf2a-aa8f5c53ecd4/sector-recognised-standards.pdf); and
* awards are only granted to students whose knowledge and skills appropriately reflect any applicable sector-recognised standards.

The sector-recognised standards for qualifications in England are published by OfS, drawing on other sources, including typical higher education qualifications at each level and degree classification descriptions for bachelors’ degrees.

For apprenticeships, overall accountability for the quality, including the occupational standard and the end-point assessment sit with the Department for Education (DfE) acting through the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The ESFA are accountable for funding education and skills for children, young people and adults. Apprentices must complete an end-point assessment to demonstrate what they have learnt as part of their apprenticeship.

The OfS is responsible for the external quality assurance of OfS registered providers that deliver integrated higher and degree apprenticeships (and are therefore responsible for delivering the end-point assessment themselves rather than an independent end-point assessment organisation).

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education are responsible for the development, review, approval and publishing of apprenticeship standards upon which apprenticeship programmes are based.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspect the quality of apprenticeship training that is delivered by providers to ensure it is high-quality and meets the needs of employers and apprentices.

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) are responsible for the external quality assurance of the majority of non-integrated apprenticeships at Levels 2-7.

Other sources of information on sector-wide standards are included in the table below.

1. **Internal reference points**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Reference point** | **Role and consideration of each reference point** |
| * [University Strategy, 2019-28](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/governance/university-strategic-plan)
* [Education strategy, 2019-28](https://www.essex.ac.uk/-/media/documents/about/governance/education-strategy-2019-25.pdf?la=en)
* [Research strategy, 2019-28](https://www.essex.ac.uk/-/media/documents/about/governance/research-strategy-2019-25.pdf?la=en)
 | These provide direction and support education and research objectives. They guide the key performance indicators (KPIs) set by the University for its targets.They should be taken into account in curriculum design, including in new or amended courses and modules; teaching, learning and assessment strategies; and programmes of work such as Curriculum Reviews. |
| * Strategic Planning Information, including the [Planning Information Portal](https://ssrs.essex.ac.uk/reporting/PIP/Pages/Default.aspx), ARC data packs and other KPI and planning reports on [Tableau](https://tableau.essex.ac.uk/#/projects/25) (access for internal staff only)
 | Data to support departmental planning processes and Annual Review of Courses. These should be used to review educational provision and in the planning of new provision and initiatives.  |
| * [University Calendar](https://www.essex.ac.uk/governance-and-strategy/governance/university-calendar)
 | Lists all approved and validated courses, including full details of University structures and regulations. |
| * [University Quality Framework](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/academic-standards-and-quality/quality-assurance-and-enhancement)
 | Policies and regulations for managing academic standards. Framed around five elements: Course/module approval; Annual Review of Courses; Periodic Review; External Examiners; Student Representation and feedback.  |
| * [University Regulations](https://www.essex.ac.uk/governance-and-strategy/governance/regulations)
* [Rules of Assessment](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/exams-and-assessment/rules-of-assessment) and the University of Essex [assessment and marking policies](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/exams-and-assessment/assessment-and-marking-policies)
 | These are key reference points for decisions on student achievement and award (e.g. Exam Boards). They align with external frameworks below, to ensure our courses are comparable with national expectations and are delivered consistently. They are taken into account in curriculum design and delivery. |
| * [Summary of Academic Policy Decisions](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/academic-standards-and-quality/annual-summary-academic-policy-decisions)
 | Details changes to policy and regulations at an institutional level. |

1. **External reference points**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Reference point** | **Role and consideration of each reference point** |
| * [Office for Students Quality and standards conditions](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/084f719f-5344-4717-a71b-a7ea00b9f53f/quality-and-standards-conditions.pdf)
 | These represent the minimum requirements that a higher education provider’s courses must meet to stay registered with the Office for Students, and so represent standards that all providers must reach.  |
| * [QAA UK Quality Code for HE](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code)
 | The Quality Code is a key reference point for UK higher education, setting out the expectations for all providers and outlining the core and common practices through which these are achieved. There is a wide range of accompanying [advice and guidance](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/the-quality-code/advice-and-guidance). |
| * [QAA Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (Qualifications Frameworks)](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/qualifications-and-credit-frameworks)
 | These set national standards, expectations and guidance for:* the level of awards (e.g. level 6 - BA/BSc; level 7 - MA/MSc)
* the type of award (e.g. foundation degrees; master’s degrees)
* the title of awards (e.g. BSc / Grad Dip / MSc) and course titles/names (e.g. Economics and Politics v Economics with Politics)

Qualification descriptors within the Frameworks are broad descriptions of the expected knowledge and abilities that students would demonstrate for each level of qualification. Programmes are designed to ensure that students can demonstrate their achievement of learning outcomes at the appropriate level.For some qualifications (e.g. master’s degrees, higher and degree apprenticeships, foundation degrees) these are supplemented by [Qualifications characteristics statements](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/the-quality-code/characteristics-statements/characteristics-statement-masters-degrees), which describe the distinctive features of these courses. |
| * [QAA Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england)
 | This includes the 2021 Higher Education Credit Framework for England, which is embedded in University of Essex courses. There is further [accompanying guidance](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/making-use-of-credit.pdf?sfvrsn=d878d781_8) on how credit can be used flexibly, which may be of particular interest for particular types of provision, including continuing professional development, ‘top-up’ degrees and accelerated degrees. |
| * [QAA Subject benchmarks](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements)
 | Subject Benchmark Statements describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in specific subject areas. They show what graduates might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their studies. They are available for bachelor’s and master’s degrees and, where available, are considered in the design and review of all relevant courses. |
| * [Department for Education (DfE)](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education)
 | Overall accountability for quality, including the occupational standard and the end-point assessment in apprenticeships |
| * [Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/education-and-skills-funding-agency)
 | The ESFA brings together the former responsibilities of the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and Skills Funding Agency (SFA) to create a single agency accountable for funding education and skills for children, young people and adults. ESFA is an executive agency, sponsored by the Department for Education. |
| * [Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education](https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/)
 | Apprenticeship standards development, review, and approval. |
| * [Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted)](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted)
 | Ofsted inspect the quality of apprenticeship training that is delivered by providers to ensure it is high-quality and meets the needs of employers and apprentices. For providers offering higher, level 6 plus and degree apprenticeships that are also regulated by the Office for Students (on the OfS Register), these providers are also in scope of OfS regulation. The OfS regulates at provider level and consider apprentices’ outcomes as part of its assessment of the overall quality of a provider. |
| * [Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual)
 | Quality of qualifications in Register of Regulated Qualifications. |
| * [Professional Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/academic-standards-and-quality/external-regulation-and-monitoring)
 | Relevant external professional, statutory and regulatory bodies recognise or accredit all or part of a course, e.g. for membership or exemption from modules offered by the PSRB. Their requirements are taken into account in course design and in the regulations that apply to relevant courses. |
| * External Examiners
 | External Examiners play a key role in offering comparison against other HE institutions and national benchmarks. There is a full role description [here](https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/academic-standards-and-quality/external-examiner-roles-and-responsibilities). Their annual reports offer feedback at course and module level and they are consulted on course and module developments according to our [external consultation framework](https://www.essex.ac.uk/-/media/documents/directories/academic-section/academic-standards-and-quality/external-engagement-consultation-framework.pdf). |
| * External academics
 | Consulted as part of course developments and approvals and included on validation and Periodic Review panels. |
| * Employer / industry experts
 | Consulted as part of course developments and approvals and engaged in initiatives to develop students’ employability skills. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Document owner** | Quality and Academic Development |
| **Document author** | Quality and Academic Development |
| **Document last reviewed by** | Aminah Suhail, Quality and Academic Development Manager |
| **Date last reviewed** | August 2024 |
| **Review frequency** | Annually |