9th Annual Postgraduate conference

'The right university, the right degree, the best student experience'

Quality in postgraduate education

Dr Jayne Mitchell,
Director of Development and Enhancement,
Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

- safeguarding the public interest in the sound standards of higher education qualifications
- informing and encouraging continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education

www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/IntroQAA.pdf

QAA: what do we do?

- Primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in UK higher education rests with individual HEIs

- QAA checks how well HEIs meet their responsibilities, identifying good practice and making recommendations for improvement.

- QAA publishes guidelines to help institutions develop effective systems to ensure students have high quality experiences.

QAA: how do we do it?

- **conduct reviews** of universities and colleges and publish reports on the confidence that can be placed in an institution's management of standards and quality
- **provide guidance** to universities and colleges on maintaining academic standards and improving quality, in line with an agreed set of ‘reference points’ (the Academic Infrastructure)
- **investigate concerns** about academic standards and quality
- **advise governments** on applications for degree awarding powers and university title
- **engage with** European and wider international developments.

Audit and review activity

- Institutional audit /review
  - Postgraduate (research) education included as part of the usual cycle of external quality assurance evaluation

- ‘Outcomes from …’
- ‘Special review’ – one off desk based review across EWNI
  www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/postgraduate/

Guidance

The ‘Academic Infrastructure’

- Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications
- Subject Benchmark Statements
- Programme Specifications
- Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education

- Other ‘reference points’ - ***Master’s degree characteristics***, ***Doctoral characteristics*** *(in preparation),* guidance on credit

Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications

- describe the achievement represented by the main higher education qualifications
- developed and agreed nationally
- aim to provide
  - clear and accurate information about the purposes and outcomes of higher education
  - explicit reference points by which to distinguish the character, level, and intended outcomes of higher education qualifications;
  - the basis for a consistent use of qualification titles in higher education.

Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

- England, Wales and N Ireland (second edition, 2008)
- 5 Levels
  - Level: bands of qualifications sharing similar outcomes

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	**FHEQ level**	**Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle**
Doctoral degrees (eg. PhD)	8	Third cycle qualifications **(end of cycle)**
Master's degrees (eg. MPhil, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	Second cycle qualifications **(end of cycle)**
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg. BA/BSc Hons)	6	First cycle qualifications **(end of cycle)**
Foundation Degrees (Fd)	5	Short cycle qualifications **(within or linked to the first cycle)**
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)	4	

Subject benchmark statements

- Over 70 individual statements, updated since 2001
- developed and agreed in partnership with subject experts / communities
- set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas
- describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity
- define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject

The Code of Practice

- comprises 10 sections
- developed and agreed in partnership with the HE community
- reference points for good practice; not compliance requirements
- public documents - used by HE providers, and QAA
- UK-wide applicability
- each section is written to a common format

Code of practice: section one - postgraduate research programmes (2004)

- Institutional arrangements
- The research environment
- Selection, admission and induction of students
- Supervision
- Progress and review arrangements
- Development of research and other skills
- Feedback mechanisms
- Assessment
- Student representations
- Complaints
- Appeals

Revised 2004

Relationships between elements of the Academic Infrastructure

Code of Practice - quality of learning opportunities

academic standards

Framework for HE qualifications (national agreement)

Programme specification (institutional staff)

Subject benchmark statements (subject community)

and other 'reference points' / requirements
(APL Guidelines; HE credit framework for England; Master's degree characteristics)

Guidance – recent developments

Master's degree characteristics -

- Advice and guidance - for programme design, delivery & review
- Source of information - for students, employers, overseas audiences…?
- To encourage providers to be clear when describing their awards (there are no nationally-agreed definitions of types)

Indicative categorisations – three principal types

I. **Research**
II. **Specialised/advanced study**
III. **Professional/practice**

- Not everyone will agree!
- Many master's will span categories
- No national definitions of degree titles or types

For each type the document identifies:

- Programme characteristics
- Intended purposes
- Intended entrants
- Relationship to further study or employment
- Characteristics of graduates
- Examples of degree titles

Guidance – recent developments

***'Guide to Doctoral degree characteristics'* – (in preparation)**

- Address matters of equivalence in different types of UK doctorate;
- Reinforce the academic standard of the UK doctorate;
- demonstrate the individual nature of the research degree as a qualification and the diversity of doctoral candidates;
- Illustrate the range and relevance of research skills and other attributes acquired by doctoral graduates during their programme of study.

Guidance – recent developments

***'A rough guide to the UK doctorate'* – (in preparation)**

- intended to be helpful to prospective and current doctoral candidates in setting their doctoral degree in context and helping inform the decision of whether or not to undertake a doctorate and if so, what type.

European developments

- The UK's national HE qualification frameworks have been verified as compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)

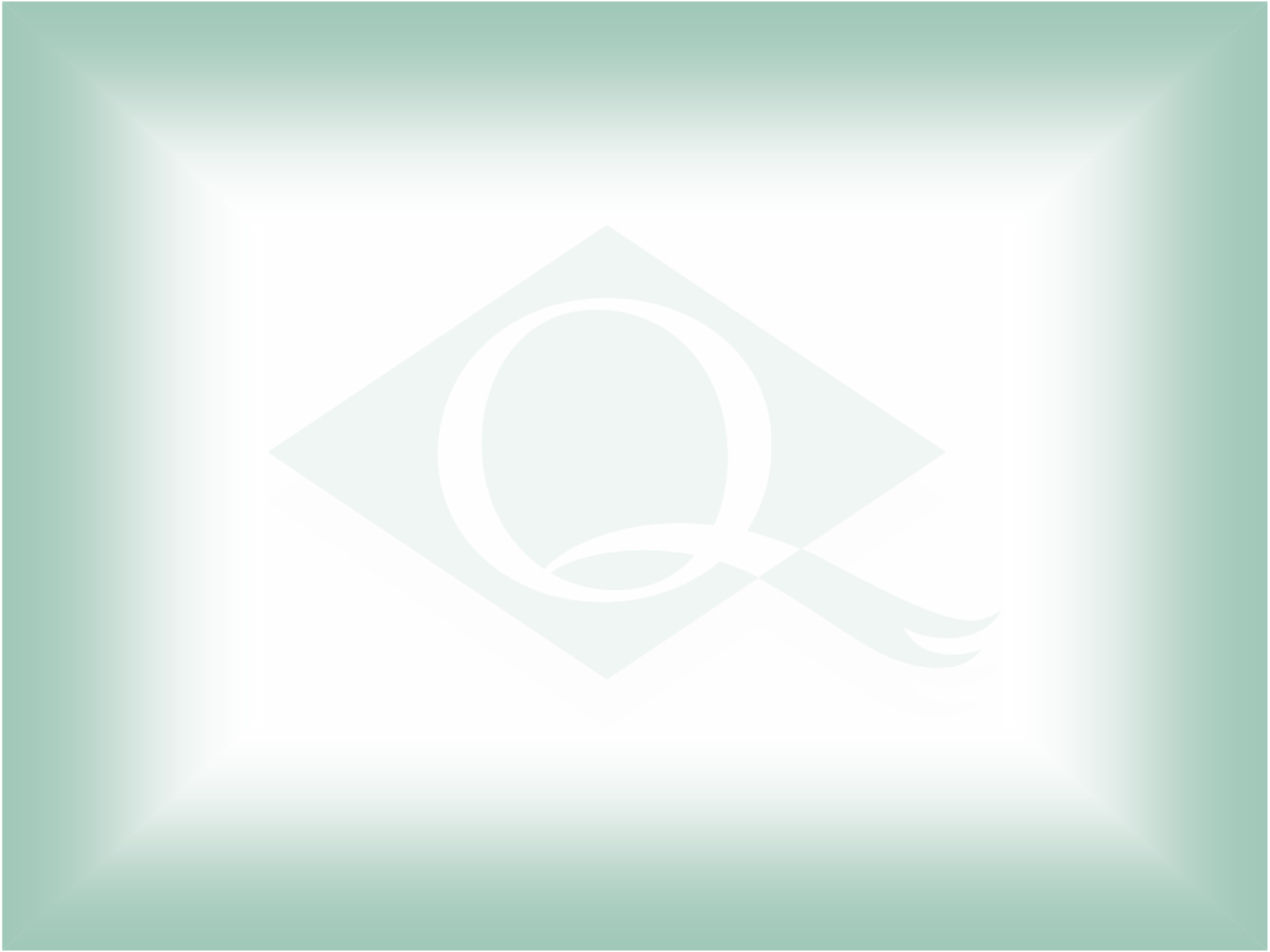
- Guidance on relationship between UK credit and ECTS is produced by the UK HE Europe Unit

Ongoing considerations for postgraduate education

- Large numbers of international students study for taught PG awards
- Clarity of information for students and student choice
- Ensure there are not QA barriers to flexible, work-based or collaborative provision
- Further work to ensure compatibility with Bologna process and address recognition issues
- UK HE must maintain its strong reputation overseas

Further information

Jayne Mitchell j.mitchell@qaa.ac.uk
Janet Bohrer j.bohrer@qaa.ac.uk
Laura Bellingham l.bellingham@qaa.ac.uk

Southgate House,
Southgate Street,
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Telephone: 01452 557 000
web: www.qaa.ac.uk
email news alert service:
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news/list.asp