Programme/Module Descriptions & QAA – Discussion Document

Background

Currently programme and module descriptions are written as part of the approval process by the programme/module proposer who in the majority of cases is an academic from the host School.

The content and detail of these descriptions varies depending on the author but at times can be very subject specific and quite heavy in detail. These descriptions are often written to provide detail to approval committees rather than with a student focus.

Course Finder is an online catalogue that provides prospective students with information on all programmes offered by the University. Included in this information is a programme description and also lists of modules available, with descriptions. These descriptions however are not the same as those provided as part of the approval process and instead are written by College Marketing Partners, aimed at students and with a recruitment purpose.

Having two separate programme/module descriptions is not desirable as it presents issues with quality assurance and data accuracy – currently there is no central oversight of the Course Finder descriptions and they are not subject to any approval process. The approved programme/module descriptions are also published online via the Programmes & Modules handbook, resulting in two conflicting publicly available descriptions.

It is a QAA requirement for programme and module specifications to be held at institution level, however there is no set criteria as to what a programme/module description should include and this is a decision to be taken by the institution. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education states:

"QAA does not prescribe any particular approach to or style of programme specification; institutions will wish to consider how they present their programme specifications and determine their content according to the purpose(s) for which they are written."

The QAA offers guidance at the level of the programme specification, the programme description is part of this specification. There is no separate guidance on module specification and description and so the same guidelines should be considered for both.

The following options are available to address this issue.

Solution One - Holding Two Separate Descriptions

By holding centrally two versions of the descriptions it is possible to satisfy both the need for a detailed academic version used for approval and also a 'recruitment' version to be used on Course Finder and in promotional materials. At present these two versions exist but are not both held centrally and are not both subject to an approval process. This option would require the marketing version of the description to be stored in Banner after being entered or updated through the Single Source interface. There would also need to be an approval layer added so that the Curriculum Management Team (CMT) could check that the two descriptions are broadly the same.
Solution 2 - Holding Only One Description

With no specific QAA criteria on what should be included in a programme/module description, it is possible that only one description is needed. There would need to be an amalgamation of the description written by the academic at the proposal stage and the description written by the College Marketing Partner. The main issue that this would present would be the logistics of how the description is written. The initial description must be written by the programme/module proposer in order to accurately reflect what the programme/module offers. The marketing aspects then need to be added to this. One option to tackle this could be to develop a template of what details we require from the academic in the first instance, so that all descriptions cover what the institution decides is essential for a description. Once this is complete and the programme/module has been approved through existing processes then the marketing detail can be added to the description and published.

Action Required

It is necessary to decide at University level what option to adopt in order that the Single Source project can hold truly definitive data. If the decision is taken to hold two descriptions, these separate fields will need to be built in to Banner and in to the Single Source interface. There will also need to be consideration given to approval processes for the marketing descriptions. If the decision is taken to hold only one description then consideration must be given to what the standard requirements are for such a description and also how the relationship between College Marketing Partners, academics and approval committees will work.

David Adams

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Example of Contrasting Module Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module Title</th>
<th>Banner Module Description</th>
<th>Course Finder Module Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principles of Marketing (07 11050)</td>
<td>An introduction to the role and significance of the 'marketing concept' and its evolution and antecedents. Buyer behaviour in consumer and industrial markets. Elements of the marketing mix. Marketing strategy</td>
<td>The nature of marketing: core concepts and orientation; key elements of Marketing Information Systems (MIS), marketing research and buyer behaviour; portfolio analysis and marketing strategy; setting objectives, market segmentation and positioning; marketing mix: branding, products, services, distribution, pricing, marketing communications; evaluating marketing; marketing management and planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills for Biosciences (03 18537)</td>
<td>The module covers the basic principles underlying the scientific method and the design of biological/biochemical experiments, including the application of appropriate statistical analyses to different types of experimental data. Data handling experience both by calculator and computer packages is included. The nature of the original scientific literature and the basic methods of retrieving information will be introduced. Practice in reading and interpreting scientific articles, in essay writing and in oral presentation are also provided.</td>
<td>Understanding/analysing quantitative data, communicating scientific information, fundamental laboratory skills, researching and writing scientific essays. Opportunity for additional maths training. (Provided via link to PDF document)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>