

Section **12**

Nottingham Trent University

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**Quality Handbook**

**Part D: Course design,  
management and  
enhancement**

**Section 12: Course design**

# Section 12

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## 1. Considerations

**The University has effective processes for the design and approval of its academic courses, and takes a strategic approach to the processes for, and outcomes of, course design and approval.**

### Requirements

- 1.1 All NTU courses must be systematically designed to ensure that the curriculum provides a high quality learning experience that is aligned to the Strategic Plan and meets internal and external benchmarks. Systematic design is linked to the academic approval process (Quality Handbook (QH) Section 5), which subjects the outcomes of the design process to peer scrutiny. Once approved, NTU courses do not remain static – monitoring and review processes prompt the need for enhancements to the course so that it remains contemporary and relevant to the needs of students, employers and other stakeholders.
- 1.2 The design of any course needs to take into account:
  - a. the University mission and Strategic Plan and School strategies and academic plans;
  - b. relevant external reference points, national trends and developments in the subject, the requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), and the needs of employers;
  - c. internal reference points, including relevant University policies and regulations contained in this QH;
  - d. inclusivity and the promotion of equality of opportunity.
- 1.3 New course design (or the major re-design of existing courses) should not take place in isolation – ideas for new courses or major re-designs should first be discussed with the appropriate Head of Department for consideration by School Executive. In addition, before detailed course design or re-design is started, the proposal will need to undergo appropriate Business Evaluation.
- 1.4 Where changes to a course are approved, appropriate notification to prospective students should take place in order to meet the requirements of the Competition and Markets Authority.

## 2. Course design criteria

**The University has clear criteria for course design, and the course design and approval process tests proposals against these criteria.**

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## Requirements

- 2.1 In translating its ideas (and the outcomes of its consultations) into a course design, a course team should take into account the following principles:
- a. coherence – consideration should be given to the intellectual integrity of the course and to ensuring that the student's overall learning experience has a logic that is clearly linked to the aims of the course;
  - b. progression – the design should promote an organised progression so that the demands on the student increase throughout the course in terms of intellectual challenge, skills, knowledge, conceptualisation and learning autonomy;
  - c. level – consideration should be given to the level of a course and to the level of the stated learning outcomes at named stages in the course; reference should be made to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) Standards and Guidance and to the Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Award Frameworks in the QH;
  - d. balance – consideration should be given to the underpinning principle of depth over breadth in the curriculum, to an emphasis on simple course structures that prioritise the core curriculum over optional choice, and to other elements within the course, such as the balance between academic and practical elements and between personal development and academic outcomes;
  - e. inclusivity – the range of requirements of learners likely to enter the course should be considered, as should equality and diversity issues;
  - f. feasibility – the expectations given to students and others (through a course specification) should be honest and deliverable.
- 2.2 The design of the course must meet the following Strategic Plan requirements:
- a. All students will develop relevant professional attributes gained through meaningful work placement or experience embedded into the design, learning, and assessment of every course.
  - b. We will continue to address differences in attainment between, and obstacles to, equal access to opportunities across all student groups.
  - c. Initiatives that stimulate staff-student research collaboration will be supported as part of the overall approach to personalisation.
  - d. All courses must integrate comparative international curriculum content.
  - e. We will reform curriculum structures to facilitate greater international mobility.
  - f. We will continue to be recognised as a leading exemplar of an environmentally responsible and sustainable organisation.
  - g. Every course will attain appropriate accreditation where available.
  - h. Academic colleagues will be given the skills, tools, and capacity to enhance a tutorial system that will underpin a personalised learning experience for all our students.



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## Explanatory notes

- In certain circumstances, it may be possible to approve the design of a course which does not adhere fully to requirement 3.2 above. Approval would be subject to the provision of strong evidence that the proposal retains the principle of course community and has no detrimental effect on timetabling; for example where blended learning is used.
  - At level 5 it is possible to operate a split year of two parts. Part one will begin in teaching week 1 and part two will begin in teaching week 16. Assessment of study in part one will, normally, be by methods other than examination.
  - Taught postgraduate courses have more flexibility in these respects, e.g. multiples of 15 credits can be approved and examinations may be held at different points in the year – provided they do not disrupt undergraduate teaching.
  - For new courses, or changes to courses, the considerations set out in requirement 3.5 above will be made as part of the viability check stage of the course design process.
- 3.6 All undergraduate courses should be designed so that students have a minimum of 20% contact time across their course.
- 3.7 Each module within a course will have aims, content, learning outcomes and assessments that serve the course specification. Each module may be assessed separately, although it is possible to assess more than one module through a course-based assessment.

## Explanatory notes

- More guidance on course and module assessment can be found in QH Section 15. For ease of reference, the following are the key expectations to be factored into course design:
  - Whole-course design of assessment;
  - Many, regular, small formative tasks, often in class;
  - Frequent feedback, with greater use of peer- and self- evaluation;
  - One or fewer summative assessments per module;
  - A limited range of assessment types;

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- A synoptic assessment piece should be incorporated into all courses.
- 3.8 Where a module is shared across a number of courses, it should be designed to be run in course cohort groups in order to enable students to identify with their own course. Exceptionally, a multi-course module can be designed with common lectures. Where the specific module outcomes rely upon an interdisciplinary mix of students within the class, it can be exempted from the above rules provided that this point is clearly articulated in the module specification and approved.
- 3.9 All undergraduate courses must include a capstone project in the final year.

## Explanatory note

- A capstone project should be a substantial piece of work that provides students with an opportunity to draw together substantive learning with subject-specific theories and methods in an integrated manner.
- 3.10 While it is possible to propose large modules for approval purposes (i.e. 60, 80, 100 or 120 credits), course teams should consider at the planning stage any potential consequences for student progression.
- 3.11 Where a course wishes to offer a year-long visa to international students, it must be 53 weeks long.
- 3.12 Accelerated routes may be designed to allow students to complete a full-time degree in two years or a part-time level in one year. If a course has been designed in such a way then the details will be set out in the course specification.
- 3.13 Course teams are encouraged to include a placement or other form of work experience within the curriculum. Such activities can either be subsumed within the overall credits required for the course or be additional to the standard curriculum (i.e. a sandwich year). If an activity is integral, a course must include an academic alternative in case the placement or other form of work experience cannot be secured (except in cases where PSRB requirements take precedence). A sandwich course must have a route enabling a student who is unable to secure a placement to transfer immediately to the final year of the degree. More information on placements can be found in QH Section 10D.
- 3.14 It is possible to structure a course in non-modular ways. For example, a course may comprise negotiated learning outcomes designed to meet work, professional or practice-based needs of a highly individualised, independent and evolving nature (such as courses geared toward demonstrating professional competence). Where a course is structured in ways that do not meet the definition of a module (or includes modules beyond the normal parameters), each unit should still be credit rated wherever possible to indicate the proportional weight of the unit.
- 3.15 In the development of undergraduate courses, the team should decide whether the final award classification will be based on just level 6 performance or whether it will include a contribution from level 5. If the latter is agreed, this will be based on a 20% / 80% split, with the larger contribution being from level 6.

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## 4. Roles and responsibilities

**The University defines the processes, roles and responsibilities for course design and approval and communicate these to relevant staff.**

### Requirements

- 4.1 Course design is coordinated by a course planning team comprised of a designated team for new courses and an existing course team for changes to courses; a course sponsor will usually be identified at an early stage to lead the process. The course team will have responsibility for:
- constructing a curriculum to meet a perceived market need in line with the University's Strategic Plan;
  - ensuring consideration of external reference points including the UK Quality Code, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, Subject Benchmark Statements and the ENQA Standards and Guidelines;
  - ensuring the course's fit with University and School strategies, policies and practices;
  - consulting with a range of interested parties, internally and externally;
  - providing complete documentation for academic approval, as detailed in QH Section 5;
  - responding to requests for modifications or further documentation.
- 4.2 While it is recognised that one individual, or a small group of individuals, will lead the design process, it is imperative that as many staff as possible have input into these stages.

## 5. Consultation

**The University takes account of reference points and draws on expertise from those outside the course in its processes for course design and approval. The University also engages students in its process.**

### Requirements

- 5.1 Course teams should make use of the following contributions during course design (proportional to the nature and scale of the proposal):
- current or outgoing external examiners (or those on cognate courses) who may comment on the proposal in light of their knowledge of existing provision;

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- b. external academic peers who may provide relevant information and guidance on developments in the discipline(s) (Advance HE is a useful resource in providing access to staff working in specific subjects);
  - c. the Development and Approval Group (DAG) members and academic peers from other disciplines within the University who may have particular expertise in aspects of course management, design or delivery;
  - d. collaborative partners (if any) who can comment on the proposal from their perspective;
  - e. students (or their representatives) on the current course (or cognate courses) who may comment from their own experience of studying the existing provision;
  - f. graduates from the current course or cognate courses;
  - g. School Standards and Quality Managers and Learning and Teaching Managers who may provide valuable information on good practice elsewhere in the University and outside;
  - h. the Centre for Academic Development and Quality (CADQ);
  - i. appropriate PSRB representatives who may comment from a practice perspective and from a knowledge of similar developments in accredited courses at other institutions;
  - j. advisers or contacts from relevant employers or practitioners who may provide relevant insights and guidance on current developments in the workplace and the industry more widely.
- 5.2 As far as possible, the entire course team should be involved in course design. Such an approach provides useful staff development for all members; encourages team building; creates a sense of ownership; and ensures a more rounded proposal. While it is expected that a course leader and / or core team will coordinate documentation and develop drafts for comments, the extent of ownership and team commitment will be explored through the approval process.

## 6. Course, module specification and learning outcomes

**The University maintains definitive records of each course which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the course, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students.**

### Requirements for course specification

- 6.1 The purpose of course specifications is to inform a range of interested parties (including potential students and their advisers; students who are already on the course; employers; and internal and external peers) about the learning outcomes for a course and the means by which these outcomes will be achieved. The primary intended audience for the course specification is the student and they should be

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written in a way that is accessible to students. All course specifications will appear on Course Finder.

## Explanatory note

- In all cases, advice can be sought from CADQ about the most appropriate way to specify courses. However, the underlying advice is to keep course specifications simple and accessible – for this purpose maximum field sizes have been determined and have been included in the Course Specification Template and guidance for its use; a blank template can also be downloaded from the CADQ website.
  - There is standard text within the Course Specification Template which should not be added to. Information on entry requirements will be held in the online Course Finder and not in the Course Specification.
- 6.2 The course specification is presented alongside supporting documents for course approval purposes (see Section 5 of the QH). Once approved, the course specification may be subject to change and modification as the course develops and in response to reflections derived from course monitoring and review. Such changes must be considered and approved through formal and defined channels. The definitive version of the course specification will be in the public domain and available via the University's website. A copy should be available for students on joining the course.
- 6.3 It is possible for several versions of the course specification to be in operation for different cohorts of students - for example, where a change to the option or core curriculum balance is being 'rolled in' over a couple of years. The publicly available version of the course specification will always be the latest one.
- 6.4 It is recognised that some courses share curricula features or have routes or pathways within them that lead to separate named awards. For such courses, which have route-specific learning outcomes, it may be appropriate to provide route-specific information to complement the overall course specification. Thus, for example, the overall course specification would indicate which routes were available and the generic outcomes to be achieved by all students on the course, while route-specific specifications would give further detail on their particular learning outcomes and the distinctive features of the route or pathway. Where sections are common across all routes the route-specific course specification can simply refer to the 'parent' specification.
- 6.5 In Combined Studies schemes, which offer free choice in the combination of subjects, it would be unwieldy to produce separate course specifications for each combination. Instead, the salient features of the scheme should be specified on the standard course specification, with learning outcomes indicating typical outcomes. Although the course specification may only describe illustrative or indicative outcomes, the course operational document will be expected to detail the

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organising or design principles that provide the framework within which the various combinations of awards sit. The course structure section of the course specification should be used to specify which combinations of awards are available.

- 6.6 In the case of Combined Studies or similar schemes, it may be appropriate to complement course specifications with subject specifications and the 'Additional Information' section of the course specification should make clear which subject specifications are available. Subject specifications should be specified on the subject specification template. These need to indicate to which courses the subject contributes and the different outcomes associated with different awards. For example, what students will achieve studying the subject alone, as a major and as a minor.
- 6.7 Where two subjects are specifically coupled on a major or minor or joint honours basis outside a Combined Studies scheme, a single course specification is preferred.
- 6.8 Course specifications should only include the course outcomes for the terminal award – e.g. BSc (Honours), MSc – and not interim awards e.g. CertHE/DipHE, PGCert/PGDip. The outcomes for these interim awards should be included in the course operational document at the approval event, and subsequently made available as part of the course handbook. Where a course is genuinely structured into stages – where students are recruited and enrolled onto an interim award rather than the terminal award – a separate course specification should be produced for each stage.
- 6.9 Some of the University's courses do not fit easily into an outcomes-led pedagogy, especially those with a large number of combinations of awards sitting within an overall framework and those that have negotiated or flexible learning outcomes. In such cases, course specifications should indicate typical outcomes or indicate the parameters within which the outcomes will be located. Course specifications for these courses may use fewer of the standard headings and this should again be discussed as part of the iterative process. As well as 'standard' courses, the following variants can be specified:
  - a. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses;
  - b. 'top-up' courses;
  - c. courses by project or thesis;
  - d. individualised courses of study (CATS);
  - e. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP).
- 6.10 The NTU Digital Framework should be used to inform the design of learning outcomes for digital practice.

## Explanatory note

- In respect of CPD courses, see QHS 3B on Professional Diploma and Professional Certificate awards.

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- The NTU Digital Framework can be found on the Organisational Development (formerly CPLD) webpages.

## Requirements for module specification

6.11 Modules should be specified on the University's module specification template; in addition, guidance on completing the template is available. Module specifications should be presented together, as separate documents, for course approval purposes. When changes are subsequently made to the course, updated module specifications will need to be approved.

### Explanatory notes

- QHS 5B should be consulted for further information on the relevant procedures for making changes to modules and courses.
  - Module changes may also need business case 'sign off' as set out in the University's Business Evaluation Process.
- 6.12 The module specification should present a succinct, accurate and accessible summary of the module's key features. Detailed information elaborating the syllabus, its delivery, indicative reading, student participation, assessment briefs and criteria etc. will be provided to students through other means, usually a module guide or handbook made available through the NTU Online Workspace (NOW).
- 6.13 Most modules will require some updating each year, for example changes to the syllabus and to the reading. Changes to module specifications will be subject to formal approval as set out in QHS 5B.

### Explanatory note

- Module Leaders need to think carefully about the degree of detail they include on the module specification; modules need some room to breathe outside of the formal approval process. It is not necessary, for example, to specify the material to be covered each week over the full academic year in the 'Contents' section. Neither are more than a few indicative texts necessary for the reading list. This is an important balance to be struck – there needs to be sufficient detail for the specifications to be useful and meaningful as a source of information and a summary of the module's key features, but sufficient flexibility to accommodate normal, ongoing updating of the module.

## Requirements for learning outcomes

6.14 A learning outcome is a statement of what a student is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate at the completion of a process of learning. Learning outcomes set the minimum achievement required for the satisfactory completion of the course or module. Course learning outcomes should be set out using the Course Specification template and module learning outcomes using the Module Specification template (see QHS 12A).

## 7. Review of processes

**The University regularly evaluates its processes for course design and approval and takes action to improve them where necessary.**

## Requirements

7.1 CADQ produces a synopsis of course development and approval issues, trends and themes that is presented to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee (ASQC) and School Academic Standards and Quality Committees (SASQCs). Where appropriate, ASQC will act to amend or otherwise enhance the University's process for course design.

<b>Policy owner</b>
CADQ

<b>Change history</b>			
<i>Version:</i>	<i>Approval date:</i>	<i>Implementation date:</i>	<i>Nature of significant revisions:</i>
Sept 2016	30.09.16	01.10.16	Removal of reference to graduate attributes Additional references to Strategic Plan and Curriculum Refresh Framework Additional requirement to notify students holding an offer of any change approved which affects the material information
Sept 2017	12.09.17	01.10.17	Addition of reference to accelerated routes (moved from CAR).
Sept 2018	12.09.18	01.10.18	References to Curriculum Refresh Framework removed and replaced with references to the Strategic Plan Reference added regarding requirement for a synoptic assessment piece to be included in all courses
Sept 2019	11.09.19	01.10.19	None
Sept 2021	07.09.21	01.10.21	None
Feb 2022	02.02.22	01.03.22	Amendment of requirement 3.5 (module length).

<b>Equality Analysis</b>		
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Sept 2015	16.11.2015	CADQ