University of
Reading

University guidelines on taught postgraduate programme specifications

General Notes on Postgraduate Programme Specifications

Introduction

1   These notes on writing programme specifications and module descriptions for postgraduate programmes have been informed by the QAA *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications* (http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/guidelines06.pdf), which were revised in 2006. They are intended to complement the University's *Notes on Undergraduate Programme Specifications*. They were amended in March 2011 to reflect procedural changes which had been approved by the University Board of Teaching and Learning.

2   These notes should also be considered alongside *the Guidelines on the design of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes* (http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/programmedesign.pdf)   and   the following documents:

- Guidelines on producing Postgraduate Programme Specifications

- Programme Specification Template for Postgraduate Programmes

- University Guidelines on Module Descriptions

- Module Description Template

3   All of these documents are broadly similar to the corresponding documents for undergraduate programmes.

The Programme Specification and its purposes

4   The Programme Specification is intended to provide a standard format for describing the University's degree programmes, in line with QAA *Guidelines*. All taught programmes at the University are expected to have an associated programme specification.

5   The QAA makes the following statements with reference to Programme Specifications:

'A programme specification is a concise description of the intended learning outcomes of an HE programme, and the means by which the outcomes are achieved and demonstrated'

'a programme specification is not simply an aggregation of module outcomes; it relates to the learning and attributes developed by the programmes as a whole and which, in general,

are typically in HE more than the sum of the parts.'

'a programme specification may be used to explain the aims and intended learning outcomes of a programme, demonstrate which reference points have been used to inform the design of the programme and its aims and intended learning outcomes, and how the programme team engaged with the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, and the Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education.

The development of a programme specification by the programme team may offer an opportunity for an institution to link quality enhancement to quality assurance through deliberative consideration of the curriculum. In such cases the programme specification may provide evidence of the deliberative process through which the programme aims and intended learning outcomes were determined, how the curriculum enables the intended learning outcomes to be achieved, and how assessments test the student's achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

An institution will normally use its programme specification to communicate information about the programmes it offers to students (prospective and current), as well as to staff, external examiners, employers and others.'

Publication of Programme Specifications

6   Historically, syllabuses were published in the University *Calendar* until the 2002-03 academic year.

7   Some time ago, the Senate decided that the syllabus entries in the *Calendar* should be replaced by a system of web-based documents, which could be made more readily available to current and potential students, as well as to staff and other interested parties such as the QAA. The master copy of a programme specification is now therefore held as a document on the web, linked from the prospectus and linked to the modules making up the programme.

8   Programme specifications are intended to serve several purposes:

   a)   a replacement for the syllabuses previously published in the University *Calendar*, as the 'contractual' statement of the programme;

   b)   a web-based document which can be linked to from programme handbooks;

   c)   a document which will be helpful to potential applicants by providing a much greater level of detail than is possible in the undergraduate prospectus;

   d)   a document which will meet the requirements of the QAA.

9   Inevitably, to meet these varying needs, some compromise is involved. Programme specifications are ordered in such a way that the material most likely to be of interest to current students and potential applicants is near the top, whilst still ensuring that all users can obtain comprehensive programme information within one document. It should be noted that the information in each section may need to be rephrased in your publicity material as it would be targeted at a different audience.

10   Programme Specifications are now stored in a central database which can be accessed through the web at http://www.reading.ac.uk/progspecs.

The Programme Specification - General points

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11   A Programme Specification template for postgraduate programmes (appended) has been drawn up to meet the objectives stated above. Every postgraduate degree programme needs to have a specification to itself, even if it is a multi-disciplinary degree. Schools may wish to take the opportunity to consult their external examiners about the detail of their programme design. It is also recommended that Schools seek the views of their students on their draft programme specifications through the *aegis* of Boards of Studies and Student-Staff Liaison Committees.

12   The first part of the specification down to 'Programme Outcomes', is intended to cover the material which will be of most interest to potential applicants and to current students. The inclusion in this first part of a summary of the programme aims and of the teaching and assessment is deliberate. It is intended to allow the first part to stand alone where the greater detail of the full document is not required and to allow the early sections to be helpful to those for whom the detail expected by the QAA would be likely to overpower, if the detail of aims and teaching were presented too early (e.g. for potential applicants).

13   Programme specifications may remain valid until revoked or until the next periodic review, whichever is the sooner. Either form of programme scrutiny should be acceptable, but it will be for each Faculty Board for Teaching and Learning to take a view.

14   A programme should be the responsibility of one single Board of Studies only.

15   In the Henley Business School, programme-specific operational quality control and assurance mechanisms are the responsibility of Programme Committees, which carry out the same functions as Boards of Studies elsewhere in the University including the production of Annual Programme Reports. There are also Boards of Studies for the broad programme areas of Undergraduate, Pre-Experience Postgraduate, Post-Experience Postgraduate and Postgraduate Research Programmes in the Henley Business School. The relevant Board of Studies take a strategic oversight of the portfolio of programmes in that area and the name of the relevant Board of Studies should be included on the programme specification. Further information on the Quality Assurance structure in the Henley Business School is provided in Quality management and enhancement processes at the University of Reading http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/qualityoverview.pdf

16   Programme specifications should include the name of the Programme Director. There should be only one programme director; the responsibility cannot be shared between two people. The role of programme director can of course rotate between the members of the Board of Studies if that is desirable.

17   A single Board of Studies can oversee several related programmes.

Subject Benchmark Statements

18   A number of Subject Benchmark Statements at postgraduate level have been published by the QAA   at   http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Master%27s-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx

19   Subject Benchmark Statements will need to be considered as part of the process of drawing up programme specifications. Schools are reminded to revisit and review the subject areas they list each year. The following statement from the QAA *Guidelines* may prove useful in this regard:

> *'Subject benchmark statements provide a helpful starting point when designing a new programme or reviewing an existing programme. However, they are not the sole*

point of reference, particularly for programmes that do not coincide with the subject definitions used in preparing the benchmark statements.

Institutions should not simply transpose outcomes from benchmark statements into their programme specifications. Benchmark statements are not intended to be draft specifications. Rather, they should be used as a point of comparison, a stimulus to reflection, and a reference against which individual programme specifications may be justified.'

20   Schools are urged to heed the warning about not transposing outcomes from Benchmark Statements into programme specifications. However, it should also be noted that as part of QAA Review, reviewers are highly likely to expect to see how Benchmark Statements have informed relevant programme specifications and will expect there to be a relationship.

21   Where a postgraduate programme is multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary, there may be no benchmark statement of direct relevance. In such cases, a number of statements can be used as a source of reference.

Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

22   There are at present no Subject Benchmark Statements for many taught postgraduate programmes in specific academic areas. This means, therefore, that at this time the major point of reference for QAA review of academic standards will be the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ).

23   The University has published the *University credit and qualifications Framework*, which is available at http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/ucqf.pdf

24   In drawing up both Programme Specifications and Module Descriptions for taught postgraduate programmes, Schools should:

- Indicate, for each module in a programme, its specific level in the 'Programme Content' section of each programme specification. This level must be appropriate to the relevant level and Qualifications Descriptor of both the revised FHEQ and the UCQF. It is **essential** in a taught Masters programme that the majority of modules and their assessed outcomes (making up at least 150 credits) are at the FHEQ Level 7, so that the programme meets both University and QAA criteria. Where programmes contain undergraduate modules (for example, in 'Conversion courses' in the Faculty of Science and in the building and property subject areas), Schools should consult their External Examiners, the relevant professional bodies and Research Council guidelines, and seek clear steers (programmes seeking or expecting approval from Research Councils and/or professional associations should normally be fully at Level 7 unless assured by such bodies that the inclusion of undergraduate modules is permitted). A paper trail should be retained for any future external reviews;

- ensure that each module description is informed by the learning outcomes of the Qualifications Descriptor relevant to the level at which the module is pitched;

- ensure that the intended learning outcomes in their programme specifications match with the Level 7 Qualifications Descriptor in the Framework. Schools should also ask themselves whether the programme curricula and the assessments allow all students the opportunity to achieve and demonstrate achievement of the outcomes;

25   The Level 7 Qualifications Descriptor states that:

Master's degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice
- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship
- originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline
  - to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level
- continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations
  - the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

Help and advice on writing Programme Specifications

26   Help and advice on writing Programme Specifications is available from the Quality Support Office or contact your Faculty Office.

Guidelines on producing Postgraduate Programme Specifications

The numbered instructions below correspond to each item on the accompanying undergraduate programme specification template, as a guide to filling in each part correctly.

Programme specifications for cohorts beginning a postgraduate programme from 2011-12 onwards will be produced and updated via the RISISweb portal. Instructions for Schools/Departments on how to update programme specifications via the portal can be found under the 'Programme Management' section on the 'Useful links and further information' page on the Quality Support Office website (http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/qualitysupport/usefullinks/qual-links.asp). Programme specifications relating to cohorts who began their programme prior to the 2011-12 academic year have been produced in Word format, using Times New Roman (or if this is unavailable, Times Roman), in 12 point size.

Template Item Number	Template Item Title and Contents
1.	**Programme title** The programme title at the head of the Specification is equivalent to the QAA's 'Final award' and 'Programme title'. In the case of Masters programmes where lesser qualifications can be awarded, this should be indicated in the programme title i.e. Master of Arts/Postgraduate Diploma/Postgraduate Certificate in X.
2.	**Awarding and Teaching Institutions** The QAA will expect to see the name of the Awarding Institution, and the Teaching Institution. For the great majority of Programme Specifications this will obviously be 'University of Reading' in both cases, except for the very few programmes where the University is not the body providing the teaching.
3.	**Relevant QAA subject benchmarking group(s)** The relevant QAA benchmarking group should be included, if applicable. Schools are reminded to revisit and review the subject areas listed by the QAA each year at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Master%27s-degree-benchmark-statements.aspx.
4.	**Programme length** The length of the programme should be given in months. Only refer to the length of the higher award in this section. Lengths of any lesser awards available are to be provided in the Part-time or modular arrangements (see section 10 below).
5.	**Programme Director** As previously mentioned, Programme Specifications should include the name of the Programme Director. A second programme director can be added to the additional box provided for this section in the RISIS portal.

6.	**Accreditation**
	Details of accreditation by a professional/statutory body should be included where appropriate. Schools are reminded to ensure that this field is filled in appropriately and to indicate if accreditation is subject to students obtaining a particular level of achievement/passing certain modules.
7.	**Summary of programme aims**
	This section should provide a brief (up to 100 words) summary of the overall purpose and direction of learning in the programme and illustrate the over-arching concepts that it embraces. It is included here as the less intensive reader will not wish to work through the detail contained in section 17 below.
	The section on programme aims (and the section on learning outcomes) will require liaison between Schools in the case of combined and multi-disciplinary degrees.
8.	**Transferable skills**
	A summary of the degree specific transferable skills conferred in the programme is required, although detailed information on the skills developed in a particular programme should be given in the Programme Outcomes section.
	Where the programme provides training for doctorate programmes (for example as part of the ESRC 1+3 scheme), this should be stated in this section.
9.	**Programme content**
	The structure and content of the programme should be given, with a clear indication of which modules are compulsory and which are optional, to be indicated in the grid on the RISIS portal. Subheadings are included should you wish to specify which term modules will be taught in.
	'Compulsory' in this context means a module which **all** students registered for the degree programme **must** take – i.e. there is no choice (including no 'either' / 'or' option) involved.
	For each module, the following should be provided:

	(a) the module code, as created when drawing up Module Descriptions;
	    (b) the module title;
	    (c) its credit weighting;
	    (d) the Level in the FHEQ of the module and its assessed outcomes.

	It is expected that the great majority of modules studied in a Masters programme will be at Level 7. The University has agreed that of the 180 credits which make a taught Masters programme, a minimum of 120 credits <u>must</u> be at Level 7. Schools must also ensure that their Masters programmes meet the requirements of and the learning outcomes stated in the Level 7 Qualifications Descriptor of the FHEQ.
	In creating Programme Specifications, colleagues must give careful consideration

	to those modules which make up the Programme. Programme Specifications should be closely informed by the relevant Module Descriptions and their learning outcomes. For further details relating to module codes, please refer to the appended *Notes on Module Descriptions*. Each programme specification must be a free-standing and self-contained document which gives a full account of the programme in question. It is not possible for programme specifications generated on RISIS to include lists of options outside the main body of the text in an attached appendix. All core and optional modules **must** be included in the specification.
10.	**Part-time or modular arrangements** The nature of a credit-based modular system for taught postgraduate programmes means that many such programmes may be studied on a part-time basis over a number of years[1]. In this section, Schools should provide details of the part-time and/or modular arrangements for the particular programme. Include the lengths for any lesser award and/or part time options here. If the section is not relevant please leave it blank and it will not be displayed on the programme specification.
11.	**Progression requirements** Details of the requirements for progressing from one part of the programme (particularly from the taught elements to the dissertation) should be given in this section. There are not normally progression requirements on postgraduate programmes, except in the case of two year full time programmes; if this section is not relevant please leave it blank and it will not be displayed on the programme specification.
12.	**Assessment and Classification** Schools will be guided to include the following explanation of the University's classification and will have the opportunity to select the description of classification which applies to their programme. The University's classification scheme is: "<u>Mark Interpretation</u> 70 – 100% Distinction 60 – 69% Merit 50 – 59% Good standard (Pass) <u>Failing categories:</u>

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[1] All programmes must also meet the overall minimum credits and the minimum credits at the level of award for each qualification as set out in the UCQF
http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/qualitysupport/ucqf.pdf.

40 – 49% Work below threshold standard
0 – 39% Unsatisfactory Work

Additionally, Schools should use the standard paragraphs below and amend or supplement if additional requirements have been approved for the programme.

Further information on the classification conventions, including borderline criteria, are available at
http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/exams/Policies/exa-class.aspx

For Masters Degree
To qualify for Distinction, students must gain an overall average of 70 or more over 180 credits and a mark of 60 or more for the dissertation, and must not have any mark below 40.

To qualify for Merit, students must gain an overall average of 60 or more over 180 credits and a mark of 50 or more for the dissertation, and must not have any mark below 40.

To qualify for Passed, students must gain an overall average of 50 or more over 180 credits and a mark of 50 or more for the dissertation. In addition, the total credit value of all modules marked below 40 must not exceed 30 credits and of all modules marked below 50 must not exceed 55 credits.

[Please amend or supplement the standard text if additional requirements have been approved for the programme.]

For PG Diploma
To qualify for Distinction, students must gain an overall average of 70 or more over 120 credits and must not have any mark below 40.

To qualify for Merit, students must gain an overall average of 60 or more over 120 credits and must not have any mark below 40.

To qualify for Passed, students must gain an overall average of 50 or more over 120 credits. In addition, the total credit value of all modules marked below 40 must not exceed 30 credits and of all modules marked below 50 must not exceed 55 credits.

[Please amend or supplement the standard text if additional requirements have been approved for the programme.]

For PG Certificate
To qualify for a Postgraduate Certificate, students must gain an overall average of 50 or more over 60 credits. In addition, the total credit value of all modules marked below 40 must not exceed 10 credits.

[Please amend or supplement the standard text if additional requirements have been approved for the programme.]

13.	**Admission requirements**
	This constitutes vital information for intending applicants. Entrants to a taught postgraduate programme would usually be expected to hold the equivalent to a 2(i) Honours degree; please state if entry to the programme is intended to be different to this. The name of the Admissions Tutor for the programme, and ideally their contact details, should also be included here.
14.	**Support for students and their learning**
	Information regarding the support that students receive for their learning should be summarised here, although some of this information might be more appropriately mentioned in other sections, particularly under the *Teaching/learning methods and strategies* in the Programme Outcomes.
	The standard statement on the template is automatically included in all RISIS-generated programme specifications.
	School-specific information to be included after this statement or elsewhere might include details of:
	• Induction programmes • Handbooks and Guides • Specialist equipment
	Boards of Studies should be aware that any such School information should be capable of being demonstrated to QAA Review teams.
	Particular attention should be paid to programmes involving a substantial distance learning component and those delivered in collaboration with other institutions, to ensure that details of additional or alternative arrangements for student support are provided. This could include details of online learning resources and support services, access to local library facilities and support services, and any provision made for students to use the University Library.
15.	**Career prospects**
	It is appreciated that this section will be easier to write for vocationally-oriented subjects, and that the information given for many non-vocational subjects is likely to be very similar. Nevertheless, it is important to give succinct but helpful guidance.
16.	**Opportunities for study abroad or for placements**
	A brief statement on opportunities for students to study in another country or on placements should be given in this section. This may include links through the Erasmus programmes, language placements or study visits.
17.	**Programme outcomes**

Specific statements of intent that predict what learners will know, understand and be able to do as a result of learning in the context of a particular programme. They describe new skills and assessable changes in behaviour that the programme is designed to bring about. They may also highlight desirable educational outcomes that are not directly assessable. For those outcomes that are assessable they provide the basis for the criteria used to guide judgements on achievement.

Programme outcomes:

- must be divided between the four subheadings shown on the template. These four areas should not be seen as separate entities and there is room for overlap between the outcomes within them. As a guide, there would normally be between 4 and 10 outcomes under each subheading, so that the key outcomes are expressed in enough generality to apply to each and every student studying on the programme.

- should provide a balance of outcomes between the two areas of joint degree programme. For a combined degree programme, it is accepted that there may be a need for more than 10 outcomes. These sections require liaison between Schools in the case of such combined and multi-disciplinary degrees.

- must be informed by the learning outcomes of their constituent modules as stated in the relevant Module Descriptions and vice versa. Whilst programme specifications may refer to specific learning outcomes of modules, it may be better simply to refer the user to the particular Module Description. For example, if independent research skills are mentioned, then emphasis might be placed on developing these through a dissertation.

- must take into account the relevance of subject benchmarks to learning outcomes.

- must be reviewed carefully each year in order to remove any reference to historic practices e.g. PARS. Any reference to specific modules within this section would also need to be amended following any changes to the availability of those modules.

18.	**Standard Declaration**
	The Standard Declaration on the template is a standard disclaimer required on each programme specification. It is automatically included in RISIS-generated programme specifications.

Programme Specification Template

The numbered items below correspond to the list of instructions on the accompanying Guidelines to producing Postgraduate Programme Specifications document, as a guide to filling in each part correctly.

| 1 | **Programme Title** |

For students entering Part 1 in 200x

| 2 | Awarding Institution: | University of Reading |

| 2 | Teaching Institution: |

| 3 | Relevant QAA subject benchmarking group(s) (if applicable): |

Faculty of x

| 4 | Programme length: |

x months

Date of specification:

| 5 | Programme Director: |

Board of Studies:

| 6 | Accreditation: |

| 7 | **Summary of programme aims** |

| 8 | **Transferable skills** |

| 9 | **Programme content** |

Compulsory		*Credits*	*Level*
Mod Code	*Module Title*		
Optional			
Mod Code	*Module Title*	x	x

| 100 | **Part-time or modular arrangements** |

| 110 | **Progression requirements** |

| 120 | |

Assessment and Classification

| 130 | **Admission requirements** |

Entrants to this programme are normally required to have obtained:

Admissions Tutor:

| 140 | **Support for students and their learning** |

University support for students and their learning falls into two categories.

Learning support is provided by a wide array of services across the University, including: the University Library, the Careers, Placement and Experience Centre (CPEC), In-sessional English Support Programme, the Study Advice and Mathematics Support Centre teams, IT Services and the Student Access to Independent Learning (S@il) computer-based teaching and learning facilities.There are language laboratory facilities both for those students studying on a language degree and for those taking modules offered by the Institution-wide Language Programme.

Student guidance and welfare support is provided by Personal Tutors, School Senior Tutors, the Students' Union, the Medical Practice and advisers in the Student Services Centre. The Student Services Centre is housed in the Carrington Building and offers advice on accommodation, careers, disability, finance, and wellbeing,
academic issues (e.g. problems with module selection) and exam related queries. Students can get key information and guidance from the team of Helpdesk Advisers, or make an appointment with a specialist adviser; Student Services also offer drop-in sessions and runs workshops and seminars on a range of topics. For more information see www.reading.ac.uk/student

[School/programme-specific information should follow this standard statement.]

| 150 | **Career prospects** |

| 160 | **Opportunities for study abroad or for placements** |

| 170 | **Programme Outcomes** |

Knowledge and Understanding

A. Knowledge and understanding of:	**Teaching/learning methods and strategies**

	Assessment

Skills

B. Intellectual skills – able to:	**Teaching/learning methods and strategies**
	Assessment
C. Practical skills – able to:	**Teaching/learning methods and strategies**
	Assessment

D. Transferable skills – able to:	**Teaching/learning methods and strategies**
	Assessment
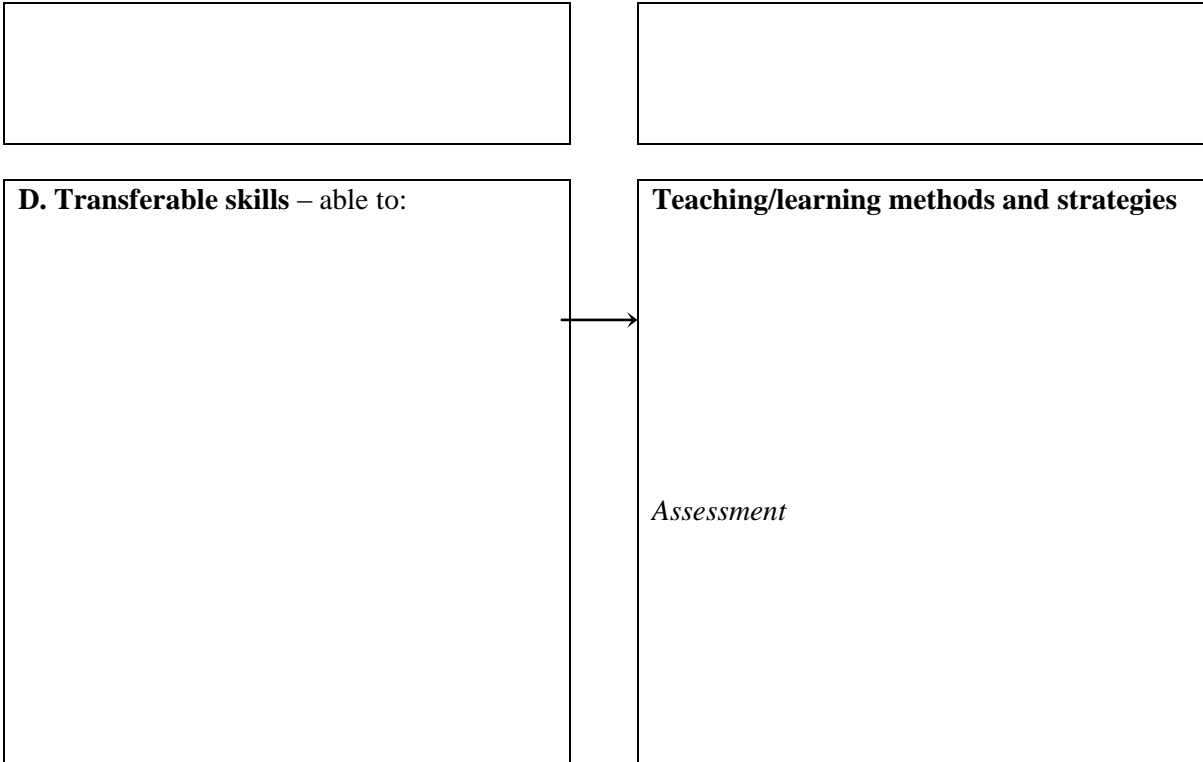
180

Please note - This specification provides a concise summary of the main features of the programme and the learning outcomes that a typical student might reasonably be expected to achieve and demonstrate if he/she takes full advantage of the learning opportunities that are provided. More detailed information on the learning outcomes, content and teaching, learning and assessment methods of each module can be found in the module description and in the programme handbook. The University reserves the right to modify this specification in unforeseen circumstances, or where the process of academic development and feedback from students, quality assurance processes or external sources, such as professional bodies, requires a change to be made. In such circumstances, a revised specification will be issued.