GUIDELINES FOR
PROGRAMME APPROVAL
2017

Maldives Qualifications Authority
Ministry of Education
Republic of Maldives

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide information to higher education institutions (HEIs) about the process of initial programme approval carried out by the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) and to guide the work of MQA. The guidelines are an explanatory document to facilitate the process of Programme approval, which constitutes the initial stage of full accreditation of a programme. They serve both as support to higher education institutions preparing their documentation and in order to ensure consistency and coherence of MQA's decisions on programme approval.

The guidelines for Programme approval have been developed after consultation with the major stakeholders in higher education in order to ensure their suitability as well as their acceptance by the academic community and the labour market.

II. Objectives of Programme Approval

The objective of Programme Approval is twofold:

   (i)   to assess whether programmes comply with the minimum requirements set out by MQA, and
   (ii)   to assess whether the programmes conform to national regulations.

MQA undertakes programme approval on the basis of six categories, covering all areas of relevance for the Programmes, both in terms of their organisation and their contents. Hence, Programme approval is based on the subject-specific and professional nature of the programmes, institutional arrangements for Programme delivery, faculty and staff as well as the programme's compliance with the formal regulations and requirements.

Quality assurance is a continuous process, for which the higher education institution carries the main responsibility. The Programme approval stage only marks an initial assessment by the competent authority, leading to the first stage of accreditation. Higher education institutions are expected to further enhance the quality of their offerings through a rigorous internal quality assurance system, which also impacts on the programmes being offered. As a next step in the process, MQA organises the accreditation of a programme on a cyclical basis. The first accreditation of a Programme should be obtained after the first batch of students will have graduated from the Programme.

The Programme Approval process applies to all programmes offered in the Maldives. Programme approval is obligatory both for national and foreign institutions regardless of the mode of delivery. Whilst MQA encourages innovative forms of delivery, it pays special attention that criteria are met. This also necessitates that providers clearly outline specifically in non-traditional modes of delivery how they ensure that the minimum criteria are met, and that both academic standards as well as the student experience are comparable to that of traditional full-time provision. The mode of delivery, which is indicated in the application for programme approval, whether it is distance, online, virtual,

part-time or full-time cannot be changed or modified after approval for the Programme has been given. In case of a change of delivery, it is required to submit a necessary application for MQA approval.

Higher education institutions applying for Programme approval are requested to carefully examine that they provide all required information according to the six categories and that they cover all sub-topics. The application documentation has to follow the sequence as outlined below. Furthermore, it has to be accompanied by the appropriate application form.

The fees for programme approval are set by MQA. The fees comprise all costs related to the assessment process, including the use of external subject experts. The fees are used to cover expenses and honoraria of the external experts as well as a proportion of overhead costs of the MQA. Fifty percent (50%) of the fee is due 7 days after MQA accepts the completed application for programme approval. The remaining 50% of the fee is due upon the completion of the approval process. In addition, the higher education institution should meet costs, if necessary, of organising local transportation arrangements for the programme approval.

III. Requirements for Programme Approval

The Programme approval depends on the fulfilment of the requirements of six categories relating to the programme:

(i)   Institutional Capacity and Management
(ii) Instruction and Academic Staffing
(iii) General Student Assessment Policies and Procedures
(iv) Student Withdrawal
(v)   Admission Requirements
(vi) Programme Content

In order to obtain Programme approval, the requirements in all categories have to be met.

1. Institutional Capacity and Management

The higher education institution has to demonstrate that it has the institutional capacity and adequate management capability to conduct the programme. It has to ensure that the process of managing the Programme is carried out effectively and efficiently and that the general study conditions conform to the needs and requirements of students.

1.1 Introduction of the HEI

In this section, a brief introduction of the institution has to be provided. Information about the status of institutional registration should also be included.

1.2 Organization

In this section, information that adequately describes the organisational management of the programme needs to be provided. The information should include the people with responsibility for the design, approval and review of the

programme, including their specific functions as well as their names, titles and qualifications. Furthermore, information needs to be provided about people in charge of the on-going management of the programme, including both academic and administrative as well as support staff. An organisational chart should accompany the description.

1.3 Relevant facilities and resources

In this section, the facilities and resources used for the operation of the programme should be outlined. As part of the information provided, an assessment of the sufficiency and adequacy of the facilities and resources needs to be made. A chart of the HEI must be provided. It is expected to include information about:

1.3.1 Furnished classrooms

It should be outlined how many classrooms will be available for the Programme including the overall capacity of these classrooms. Furthermore, a description of the teaching and learning facilities (e.g. smart-boards, projectors, etc.) should be provided.

1.3.2 Laboratories

If applicable for the programme, the laboratories used for teaching and learning should be described in terms of their student capacity as well as the facilities contained within. Information about the health and safety features of the laboratories should also be provided.

1.3.3 Computer rooms

Information needs to be provided about the accessibility of computer facilities for students, including the computer to student ratio, operating hours. It should also be outlined how students may use their own computers and devices, including information about Internet and Intranet access.

1.3.4 Library

Information should be provided about the library resources relevant for the programme. This information should both relate to physical books, journals available in the library as well as access to electronic resources. It is recommended to give careful consideration to having a physical library and not just access to electronic resources. The opening hours of the library should be indicated.

1.4 Brief explanation of the internal quality assurance mechanism

In this section, the arrangements for assuring the quality of the study programme and the management of the quality assurance should be outlined. This information is expected to include an outline of the quality assurance policy, processes and procedures. The mechanisms for gathering feedback about the study programme, both from internal and external stakeholders should be explained. It should be

outlined how this feedback will be analysed and used in order to enhance the quality of the study programme. The use of questionnaires about individual units and modules, teaching staff as well as the overall Programme and the general study conditions should be outlined, including a description of the follow-up mechanisms to be used. Furthermore, it is expected that a brief explanation is being provided about how the quality assurance mechanisms for the programme are integrated into the institutional quality assurance procedures.

2. Instruction and Academic Staffing

In this section, information about the academic staff active in the programme is to be provided. It should be noted that any staff arrangements have to be in place before the programme commences. Any official documentation, such as contracts and agreements, has to be retained at the registry office of the higher education institution. As part of the information given, it is expected that an outline is provided that describes the adequacy and sufficiency of the teaching staff.

2.1 Programme Co-ordinator

2.1.1 Minimum academic qualifications and teaching experience of the Programme co-ordinator

The policy of choosing a programme co-ordinator, i.e. the person who is overall in charge of the Programme as well as information about them needs to be provided. It should include a description of the academic qualifications, as well as the teaching experience, alongside a research record. The qualification of a co-ordinator should be higher than the programme they co-ordinate. In addition, information about the managerial experience of the Programme co-ordinator should be given.

2.1.2 Responsibilities of the Programme Co-ordinator

The specific responsibilities of the Programme co-ordinator in relation to the operation of the programme are to be described.

2.2 Teaching staff

2.2.1 Minimum number of teaching staff required for this Programme

Information needs to be provided regarding the minimum number of teaching staff to be involved in the programme. This information should include the maximum staff-student ratio according to which the programme can be offered.

2.2.2 Minimum academic qualifications and teaching experience of the teaching staff

The policy as well as information about the minimum academic requirements and qualifications of the teaching staff involved in the programme should be provided. The qualifications of the teaching staff should be higher than the programme they teach. This should include any information about the ratio of qualifications of the teaching staff, i.e. which proportion of teaching staff hold a PhD or a Master's degree.

2.2.3 Responsibilities of the teaching staff

Information about the specific responsibilities of the teaching staff should be provided. This is supposed to include an overview of the workload of teaching staff in relation to the programme.

2.3 Staff performance and appraisal

2.3.1 Performance criteria and process to be utilized for staff appraisal

Information about the assessment of staff performance and their appraisal should be provided. The description should include references to the regulations and policies about staff appraisal of the higher education institution. Any instruments used, such as observation checklists, questionnaires and self-assessment guidelines should be annexed.

2.3.2 Arrangements in place for students' evaluation of the Programme

In addition to the overall information provided in section 1.4, information should be provided about how student evaluations of the Programme are organised, in terms of their regularity, types of evaluations and how the results of the evaluations are analysed and followed-up. Any evaluation instruments, such as questionnaires should be annexed.

3. General Student Assessment Policies and Procedures

This section is intended to present general information relating to student assessment in the study programme.

3.1 Assessment and evaluation processes

Information should be provided in a summative manner about the assessment methods used for the modules and units as outlined in section 6.6.10.

The required standards for assessment must be clearly specified in relation to each module /unit of the programme. Assessments must also be appropriate for the mode of delivery of the programme.

In general students must be required to produce at least one piece of individual work (written or otherwise) from which the unaided capability of a student could be assessed. All modules of programmes from Level 1 to Level 9 qualifications (excluding Masters by research) must include assessment equivalent to at least 50% (fifty percent) of aggregate marks in assessment conditions which are supervised, timed and controlled.

This assessment can include unseen written examinations, written open book/open notes examinations, structured multiple choice questions, oral presentations in class, oral examinations, scheduled meetings with supervisors, demonstrations, laboratory work, in-class quizzes, etc.

Information must also be given about home-written assignment tasks and weightage. In general, to reduce incidences of third-party assistance or involvement in preparing assignments, no module should require all home-written assignments.

Information must also be given about home-written assignment tasks and weightage. In general, to reduce incidences of third-party assistance or involvement in preparing assignments, no module should require all home-written assignments.

3.2 Procedure on reporting students' academic progress

Information should be provided about the procedures to report the academic progress of students. The information is supposed to include reference about the periodicity of these reports. In addition, information should be provided about any mechanisms in place for regular feedback and to support students who underperform and any warning systems in use.

3.3 Graduation requirements

Information should be provided about general policies regarding graduation requirements, such as minimum attendance and participation, minimum credits, academic performance, completion of internships, or any other requirements stipulated by the institution.

3.4 Policy on academic misconduct

Information should be provided about policies on the academic conduct of students. These policies should include references to academic dishonesty and plagiarism. It should also be outlined what the consequences of potential misconduct are. Furthermore, an account should be given how students are informed about the policies and procedures.

4. Student Withdrawal

This section is to provide general information about policies and consequences of student withdrawal.

4.1 Policy on the withdrawal of a student

Information should be provided about the general policy relating to student withdrawal relating to the programme. This information is to include specific regulations on withdrawal in relation to attendance, student performance and misconduct.

4.2 Policy on voluntary withdrawal and tuition fee reimbursement

Information should be provided about the policy on voluntary student withdrawal. This information should include timelines and deadlines for the withdrawal as well as consequences with regard to tuition fee reimbursement. Furthermore, information should be provided about the issuance of transcripts of records of student achievements.

5. Admission Requirements

5.1 Academic requirements

Information should be provided relating to the policy on minimum academic requirements expected from students in order to be considered for enrolment in the programme. Any entry requirement set for the programme should comply with the minimum entry requirements approved by MQA. Furthermore, a description should be provided about how the policy on academic requirements is practically implemented in the selection process.

5.2 Experience-related requirements

The general policy of the provider and specific information about the programme should be given relating to any applicable experience-related requirements or alternative entry requirements expected from students in order to be considered for enrolment in the programme. Furthermore, an outline should be provided about how the experience-related requirements are considered in the selection process. The provider should be careful not to use the alternative entry requirements as the main route of entry into a programme. Hence, it is recommended to set only a reasonable percentage of applicants to be considered for enrolment under the alternative criteria.

5.3 Policy on providing advanced standing

Information should be provided with regard to the overall policy on providing advanced standing and the recognition of prior learning. This should include information about the types of learning that can be taken into account, i.e. formal education, non-formal and informal learning. Advanced standing should only be

given for prior study that has been undertaken at a higher level than that, which is the minimum entry qualification level. For example, advanced standing in a Bachelor's degree cannot be given for a Level 4 Certificate IV, which is the minimum entry qualification for Bachelor's degree. However, it could be possible to grant advanced standing for a MQA recognised Level 5 Diploma to give exemption of year 1 of a Bachelor's degree and for an MQA recognised Level 6 Advanced Diploma to give exemption of year 1 and 2 of a Bachelor's degree. Also, advanced standing cannot be given for prior experience.

5.4 Methods of verifying the validity of prior learning to grant advanced credits

Information should be provided on how the higher education institution is verifying the prior learning achievements of students in order to provide advanced standing. This should include information about how the achievements of specific learning outcomes, is being verified.

Advanced standing should be granted for modules or a group of units/subjects/modules deemed substantially equivalent (similarity of 70% or more) to units/subjects/modules in the specific course of study for which admission is granted by the institution. Once advanced standing is granted for units/subjects/modules, they should be clearly mentioned on student transcript as "Exempt". Provision of advanced standing (transfer of credit for prior learning) will lead the student to complete fewer subjects overall to receive the qualification and henceforth the duration may be reduced.

Advanced Standing should only be given for prior study that has been undertaken at a higher level than the minimum entry qualification level for a given course of study. For example, advanced standing in a Bachelor's degree cannot be given for a Level 4 Certificate IV, which is the minimum entry qualification for Bachelor's degree. Advanced standing for informal education or prior work experience cannot be taken into account.

5.5 Maximum credits to be granted as advanced standing

Information should be provided about the maximum number of credits that can be awarded as advanced standing. This should also include information about any units that cannot be replaced through prior learning, if applicable. It is expected that the maximum number of credits that could be awarded as advanced standing do not amount to more than 1/3 of the total number of credits. This does not apply to qualifications that are part of the same Programme and hence can be considered as integrated shorter qualifications.

6. Programme Description

This section is intended to present a description of the programme in relation to the overall goals of the programme. Information should also be provided about teaching, learning and assessment methods used, the modules or units that form the Programme and specific requirements thereof.

6.1 Goals of the Programme

Information should be provided about the overall goals and objectives of the Programme and how it fits in with the institution's Mission and Strategic Plan, the demand from the labour market and appropriately qualified potential students, and opportunities for graduates.

This section should also include an account of how the individual units build up to the overall goals.

6.2 Outcomes of the programme

Information about the programme outcomes should be provided. This information is expected to include references to the level descriptors as outlined in the Maldives National Qualifications Framework. A description should be provided as to how the Programme outcomes ensure that the level descriptors are being met.

6.3 Method/process utilized in programme development

Information should be provided about how the programme was developed, the committee and consultation processes engaged and the benchmarks and affiliations used in the process. If the help of another university was used, it should be mentioned here. Academic qualifications of the course development team should also be provided.

6.4 Programme Summary

A brief outline of the programme should be provided. This outline is expected to include:

- a list of all modules or units with the respective language of instruction
- the duration of the Programme, including semester details
- the credits of the individual modules or units
- the learning outcomes of each module or unit

The information should be presented in a table format.

6.5 Learning outcomes and level descriptors

Information should be provided about how the learning outcomes of each individual module or unit relate to the corresponding level descriptors in the Maldives National Qualifications Framework. This information should be provided using a mapping grid. Furthermore, any overlap between learning outcomes should be explained. Further information can be obtained in the MQA document "Notes to Programme

Developers on Linking Level Descriptors to Learning Outcomes", provided in the "Manual for Conducting Programme Approval".

6.6 Module outlines

Information should be provided about the outlines for each individual module or unit. For each module or unit, information needs to be given on the eleven sections listed below.

6.6.1 Modules / units

Information about the name of the module or unit should be provided. In addition, a short description of the module or unit should be given.

6.6.2 Module Code Number

If applicable, the module code number should be provided.

6.6.3 Credits, learning hours and contact hours

Information relating to credits of the module or unit should be provided. The relation of contact hours to individual learning should be outlined. It is expected that contact hours should be 50% (1/2) of learning hours for qualifications from Certificate 1 to Certificate 3, and 33% (1/3) of learning hours for qualifications from Certificate 4 and above.

One credit resembles 10 learning hours. Furthermore, information should be provided about how the assessment about the individual study time has been made.

6.6.4 Mode(s) of delivery

Information should be provided about the mode or modes of delivery, i.e. lectures, seminars, workshops, group works, distance education, blended learning, online study or virtual learning. It is expected that an explanation is provided about why and how the chosen mode of delivery best contributes to the achievement of the learning outcomes. Include options for part-time and fulltime study.

Information should also be included about every delivery site at which the HEI intends delivering the Programme.

6.6.5 Minimum qualification and experience of instructors/lecturers

Information should be provided about the minimum academic qualifications required from teaching staff involved in the module or unit. This policy should be consistent with the policies described under 2.2.

6.6.6 Pre-requisites

If the module or unit requires any pre-requisites, these should be outlined.

6.6.7 Co-requisites

If the module or unit requires any co-requisites, these should be outlined.

6.6.8 Expected learning outcomes

Information should be provided about the expected learning outcomes of the module or unit. This should include a description of how the specific teaching and learning methodology is best suitable to acquire the intended learning outcomes.

6.6.9 Curricula content

Information should be provided about the specific curricula content that is covered in the module or unit. This should include an overview of the individual sessions that form part of the module or unit. This information should be presented in a table format.

Information about any practical or work-based involvement, if any, should also be provided. These components must be linked directly to the expected learning outcomes of the Programme.

6.6.10 Specific assessment methods and grading criteria

Information should be provided about the specific forms of assessment and grading criteria in the module or unit. An account should be given as to how the chosen form of assessment best relates to the learning outcomes of the module or unit. In general, the amount of work expected from any student across all assessment tasks should relate to the credit point value of the subject and with the complexity of the material studied.

6.6.11 List of reference materials, if relevant.

Information should be provided about the reference material to be used in the module or unit. If available, names of documents such as hand-outs, workbooks, teacher guides, lecture notes or textbooks should be annexed as a list.

IV. Development of a Manual for Implementation of the Guidelines for Programme Approval

MQA would develop a Manual/Handbook to facilitate the implementation of this Guidelines for Programme Approval. This Manual/Handbook would provide the following: (i) Standard Operating Procedures for MQA staff to implement the Programme Approval process, (ii) Flowchart for implementing the process of programme approval, (iii) Format and Requirements for Preparing Programme Documents for Approval (updated), (iv) Programme Document Review form, and (v) Application Form for Programme Approval (updated).