



香港學術及職業資歷評審局  
Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of  
Academic & Vocational Qualifications

# Guidelines on Developing Applied Degree Programmes

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 These guidelines are designed for institutions which are seeking to develop applied degree programmes<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.2 The current document provides practical guidelines to institutions to incorporate the characteristic features of applied degree programmes in developing new / enhancing existing programmes.
- 1.3 These guidelines are subject to regular reviews and updates from time to time.

## 2. Positioning of Applied Degree Programmes

- 2.1 The development of applied degree programmes aims to respond to society's needs for professionals and talent who are competent in specialised skills in applied nature that are closely aligned with industries or professions and can be readily transferred to job settings.
- 2.2 Applied degree programmes are equal in standing as with other conventional degree programmes. Specially, for applied degree programmes at undergraduate level, they are pitched at QF Level 5, same as traditional bachelor's degree programmes. The development of applied degree programmes strengthens the vocational and professional education and training (VPET) articulation pathway, through enabling students with VPET background, such as learners and graduates of Applied Learning (ApL) subjects in the senior secondary education and higher diplomas at the sub-degree level, to have their relevant learning experiences duly recognised. The characteristic features of applied degree programmes will also be applicable to Master and Doctoral degrees at QF Levels 6 and 7 on fit for purpose basis.
- 2.3 Moreover, applied degree programmes are embedded with distinct and prominent features that would differentiate them from other degree programmes:
  - In terms of admission, applied degrees should adopt flexible admission requirements to support the articulation of students from different backgrounds, taking into account their relevant learning and work experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Degrees include bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees, which are pitched at QF Levels 5, 6 and 7 respectively.

- In terms of curriculum, the content of applied degrees should be industry-driven with an emphasis on work-readiness to support the development of the economy as a whole and the target industries or professions in particular. Where possible, the adoption of Specifications of Competency Standards (SCS) and Vocational Qualifications Pathways (VQP) under HKQF in developing the programmes are strongly encouraged.
- In terms of programme delivery, applied degrees provide substantive opportunities in work-based learning and assessment. This can support the development of specific skills that are in line with the demand of the industries or professions.
- In terms of duration, exit and awards, applied degree programmes may comprise modules delivered in flexible mode, and provide multiple exit points with qualifications recognised under HKQF.
- In terms of quality assurance, there is a strong emphasis on industry engagement, with employers, professional bodies or associations participating in the design, delivery and assessment of the programmes.

2.4 Applied degree programmes provide an advanced level of study contributing to a holistic and completed VPET pathway. It also provides an alternative option for students in higher education to pursue credentials that can facilitate their career development in a particular industry or profession.

### 3. Characteristic Features of Applied Degree Programmes

3.1 Characteristic features of applied degrees are exemplified in the following seven areas:



3.2 To align with the positioning, applied degree programmes should be embedded with the above characteristics. There are numerous issues that need considerations in the development of applied degree programmes and the following guidelines seek to provide detailed information about this process.

- 3.3 The guidelines comprise two parts. While the first part describes each of the characteristic features and their importance to applied degree programmes, whereas the second part explains the implementation of these features.

## I. Programme Objectives and Learning Outcomes

### (i) *Special Features*

An applied degree programme is generally designed for a specific industry or profession. To provide students with the relevant skills and experience for articulation along the progression routes, it is essential to specify the unique role of an applied degree programme in supporting the future development of the industry or profession, and how the programme can facilitate students' progression along the career pathway.

### (ii) *Practical Implementation*

- a. When identifying programmes for development, institutions should conduct analyses on the future development of the target industries or professions in order to anticipate the manpower needs and validate the demand for an applied degree programme.
- b. The programme objectives and learning outcomes of an applied degree programme should include the following information:
  - Positioning of the programme by specifying -
    - its niche in the VPET pathway;
    - industry specific-skills that the programme is tailoring to;
    - how the programme can meet the developments of the industries or profession; and
    - engagement and support from the industries or professions.
  - Manpower needs of the target industries or professions that the programme is addressing; and
  - Professional, industry or regulatory requirements that the programme can meet, where appropriate.

## II. Admission Requirements

### *(i) Special Features*

To support the development of VPET pathway and to cater the diverse backgrounds, interests and aspirations of different students, the target students of applied degree programmes may include school leavers as well as in-service applicants, who are vocationally or professionally qualified with or yet to acquire an academic qualification for meeting the general entrance requirements for undergraduate programmes.

In this regard, in addition to academic achievements, work experience and other forms of prior learning should also be duly recognised by the applied degree programmes so long as the students admitted into the applied degree programmes have the abilities to undertake and complete the programmes.

Moreover, with a view to minimising duplication of learning effort and promoting credit accumulation and transfer, the programmes should consider stipulating entrance requirements for senior year admissions, tailoring to students with different levels of prior learning. A curriculum design in supporting multiple entry and exit points is highly preferred.

### *(ii) Practical Implementation*

- a. An applied degree should have a well-defined and competency-based admission requirement which consider factors in addition to academic achievement, such as work experience, micro-credentials, vocational qualifications and training, etc.
- b. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) mechanism should be established to recognise students' relevant skills and knowledge that have already been acquired through previous training, work, or other types of informal and non-formal learning. Institutions have to determine evidence to be submitted for substantiating students' knowledge and skills. Moreover, there should be clearly defined standards and assessment mechanism to verify students' level of attainment (e.g. vetting of relevant documentary proof, interviews, written tests or practical tests) for the purpose of admission.
- c. Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) mechanism should be established to allow students to obtain credit for components in the current programmes which they have already mastered through previous learning. Institutions have to devise policies and tools (e.g. mapping) to measure how the prior learning of an individual, including work experience, academic / professional qualifications and training, meets the requirements of the current qualifications when processing

applications for admission and senior year entry. CAT recognition should support programmes and qualifications in the Hong Kong Qualifications Register, including in particular professional qualifications, RPL qualifications, qualifications underpinning Continuing Education Fund, employees retraining and lifelong learning. Customised learning support should be provided in order to ensure students are equipped with the necessary theoretical, technical, and professional knowledge and skills for the programmes.

- d. Institutions should apply the RPL and CAT mechanisms to facilitate the articulation of higher diplomas and associate degrees holders. Relevant sub-degree programmes for articulation should be identified.
- e. Institutions should provide due recognition to students' qualifications obtained from relevant ApL courses of the senior secondary curriculum for admission to applied degree programmes.
- f. Information on admission requirements should be transparent to students, parents and the public so that informed decisions can be duly made. In particular, details of CAT policies, programmes or qualifications eligible for articulation, and RPL mechanism for admission should be communicated to the stakeholders and put on the Hong Kong Qualifications Register.
- g. To facilitate articulation to an applied degree programme, institutions are encouraged to consider providing courses and programmes, such as relevant ApL courses and higher diploma programmes, to establish an articulation pathway for the target industries and professions.

### **III. Curriculum Design**

#### *(i) Special Features*

To support the admission of diverse learners, the curriculum design of applied degree programmes should facilitate the provision of multiple entry and exit points, allowing students to move between study and work thereby gaining industry-relevant experience for further studies in a flexible manner.

There are occasions where students may take a break from their studies for various reasons. Under the multi-entry and multi-exit structure, students may have the choice to suspend their learning in the programme mid-way and resume learning at a later stage as and when they deem appropriate. A student can obtain appropriate credential(s) upon successful completion of the required credits and can enter the labour market with a qualification or save the credits for continuing the education at a later stage. This makes education more convenient for students and allows them to select the most suitable pace of



learning.

The curriculum development of applied degrees should also take note of the development in VPET, such as the developments of SCS and VQP under HKQF and emerging trends such as micro-credentials. Institutions are encouraged to refer to relevant SCS and VQP for developing programmes that can best meet the needs of the industries. This can be coupled with the development of micro-credentials to fully utilise the multi-entry and multi-exit structure and equip aspiring entrants or in-service practitioners with requisite competencies to progress along the career ladders.

*(ii) Practical Implementation*

- a. There should be a built-in curriculum design that can facilitate flexible admission and provide multiple entry and exit points. The curriculum should provide a combination of subjects that would offer multiple entry and exit points. Differentiated from other degree programmes, applied degree programmes have an industry-centric and practice-oriented curriculum. Therefore, the curriculum should be designed with an integration of theories and practical training. Internal articulation of subjects within the curriculum is essential so that students can choose and learn the subjects of their choice, while getting appropriate certifications upon successful completion of the requirements. For example, upon completion of the first two years of study and fulfilment of the graduation requirements of a higher diploma, students may exit the programme with a higher diploma award and choose to gain industry experience before resuming study at a later stage.
- b. Institutions should stipulate study periods that can adequately prepare students for the qualifications. It has to ensure students entering or leaving the programmes at different points can attain the same level of competences underpinned by the exit awards.
- c. There should be a timely curriculum review cycle to ensure close alignment with industry advancement and technological development. Meanwhile, the review should consider developments of SCS and VQP under HKQF, as well as emerging trends in VPET, such as micro-credentials, collaborative learning and technology-enabled learning.
- d. Institutions are encouraged to consider offering different modes of study (e.g. part-time evening, sandwich and other flexible modes of study) to facilitate students from different backgrounds, including in-service practitioners, in pursuing bachelor's degrees.

#### **IV. Work-based Learning**



*(i) Special Features*

Applied degree programmes focus on equipping students with competences necessary to enter and excel in the job market. Applied degree programmes are of applied nature with an industry-relevant curriculum, making work-based learning an indispensable component in the programme curriculum.

Work-based learning consists of structured learning opportunities taking place in authentic or simulated work settings which enable students to connect their learning with real-life workplace conditions by undertaking work activities under supervision. The work-based learning activities may take various forms such as internships, practicums, simulation or other learning activities in the authentic or simulated work environment, preferably supplemented with preceding induction and orientation activities.

Engagement of industries or professions is essential in the design, delivery and assessment of work-based learning. Their participation can provide the much-needed exposure to real work, enable authentic training and application of work-ready skills in real-life settings.

*(ii) Practical Implementation*

- a. Institutions should first identify skills that the target industries or professions require and how these can be developed through the use of different instructional methods. The learning outcomes of work-based learning component (either on site or through simulated methods) have to be mapped to authentic workplace delivery contexts.
- b. Institutions should integrate the work-based components with other parts of learning. Work-based learning experience in early parts of study is often used as a basis for developing the subsequent learning activities. For example, with the competences developed in internships, students can carry out industry-based projects in the real workplace for solving authentic problems of a company or an industry / profession.
- c. Institutions should develop a collaboration policy with industries or professions so that all parties can work together in the design, delivery and assessment of the programmes. It requires the two parties to agree on a shared agenda, i.e. how the arrangement of work-based learning can reflect and be aligned with the industry demand. It is essential that employers see the benefits so that they will work together to identify types of opportunities available for students and create assignments / projects which fit the respective objectives.
- d. Mentoring system should be established to support students' learning in the workplace, which usually includes the workplace supervisors, academic staff responsible for classroom teaching, and coordinators for arranging the work-based learning. Institutions should offer training to workplace supervisors and teaching staff on providing students with industry-specific support, general career and education guidance, as well as skills in conducting work-based learning and assessment.
- e. Institutions are encouraged to consider providing extended opportunities of work-based learning experience, such as cross-disciplinary learning projects and non-local learning opportunities, to broaden students' exposure.
- f. Institutions are encouraged to consider integrating and embedding the programme delivery in collaboration with industry with a view to delivering a substantive part of the programme in industry context.
- g. Institutions are encouraged to put in place mechanisms and measures to recruit qualified practitioners as teaching staff and enable their teaching staff to update their work-based knowledge and skills through such measures as secondment and mentorship.

- i. Institutions are encouraged to consider facilitating teachers and students to carry out applied research and development on products and services with a view to supporting further integration with industries.

## V. Quality Assurance

### (i) *Special Features*

Applied degrees have distinctive features in the different areas, including but not limited to flexible admission design, work-based learning and assessment, and recognition of industries and/or professions. Consequently, it is essential to review whether the existing quality assurance system of an institution can appropriately support, enhance, monitor and evaluate the implementation of applied degree programmes.

Moreover, industries or professions are playing an increasingly proactive role in collaborating with education institutions. Their participation should not be limited to the internship or industrial attachment components of an applied degree programme. Instead, the quality assurance mechanism of applied degrees should allow and reflect the engagement of industries or professions in the design, delivery and assessment of the programmes at all levels. Through bringing in the latest development and standards of the professions or industries, their participation can further enhance the synergy between learning and employment.

### (ii) *Practical Implementation*

- a. The quality assurance mechanism of an applied degree programme should reflect engagement of industries or professions in the following areas:
  - industries or professions having a stake in developing talent have a representation in the programme committees / programme advisory committees, serving as members or advisors to provide inputs on curriculum design. This is to ensure the programmes are up-to-date and preparing students with skills relevant to the prevailing and future needs of the industries or professions.
  - industry and professional members are engaged in programme delivery and assessment via-
    - acting as part-time or guest lecturers in programme delivery to disseminate industry practices, enabling students to perform effectively in an area;

- acting as external examiners, where appropriate, to ensure achievement of students’ learning outcomes through industry practices;
  - acting as assessors, where appropriate, for work-based learning (e.g. practicums, internships or projects) and other practical subjects, embedding industry standards to evaluate students’ performance; and
  - providing comments on the alignment and mapping between delivery contexts in the workplace with the learning outcomes of the work-based learning components (e.g. practicum or internships).
- b. There should be mechanisms in collecting relevant data to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of applied degree programmes in achieving the programme objectives and learning outcomes as well as the implementation of the characteristic features (e.g. performance of students admitted via different background, their articulation to the target industries / professions, feedback of industry partners). In particular, institutions should take into account experience gained from the first year of programme operation for possible enhancements.

## **VI. Recognition and Support from Industries, Professions and Regulatory Authorities**

### *(i) Special Features*

To provide students with an access to the target industries or professions, institutions have to maintain close collaborations with the stakeholders and continuously look for opportunities to help students obtain the needed recognition of and support from the target industry / profession and relevant regulatory authorities.

### *(ii) Practical Implementation*

- a. Institutions should consider the following measures, where appropriate, to obtain support from relevant employer sectors and recognition by licensing, regulatory, and professional bodies:
- Explicitly stating the target industries, professions or professional qualifications in the development of the applied degree programmes;
  - Clearly delineating the target jobs for its graduates and make this information available to students, parents and the public;

- Building a strong network with relevant stakeholders in supporting and maintaining the edge of the programmes as highly relevant to the target industries or professions. In particular, it is important to ensure that teaching staff has a close connection with the industries so that they can be kept updated on the industry development to facilitate programme development and delivery;
- Develop and maintain close collaborations with industries and professions with a view to articulating graduates to employment.
- Obtaining evidence of support from industries, professions or professional bodies, such as letter of support from employers, professional recognition from professional bodies or regulatory authorities, etc. This information will be made available to students, parents and the public; and
- Conducting systematic analyses on graduate destinations, demonstrating that the applied degrees are highly relevant to and well-received by the target industries or professions. The information will be made available to students, parents and the public to assist them to make an informed decision.

## VII. Technology Application

### *(i) Special Features*

Technology plays an essential role in the workplace as it is transforming the way that work is being accomplished. This has implications for the design of learning environments, including the content, delivery method, and assessment where work requirements are part of the content of applied degree programmes.

As technology becomes more important in nowadays workplace across different disciplines, there are also growing expectations that technology as a skill is part of the learning experience, and that students are equipped with understanding and experience of its use in the target industries or professions.

Furthermore, with flexible admission requirements, students of applied degrees may come from diverse backgrounds with different learning needs. Institutions should adopt appropriate use of technological learning tools to facilitate students' learning. Advanced pedagogy and technological tools can also facilitate equipping students with work-ready skills.

### *(ii) Practical Implementation*

- a. When designing the use of technology in learning / teaching, the following factors should be considered:

- Impacts of workplace technologies and how these can be translated and incorporated in the programme contents in line with the learning, teaching and assessment; and
- Technological competency of teaching staff so that they are competent to apply new technology in teaching and learning delivery.



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