

INFORMATION ON THE NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

In the United Kingdom (UK), Higher Education (HE) is a devolved matter, with political oversight provided by the UK Government and Parliament (England), the Scottish Government and Parliament (Scotland), the Welsh Government and Parliament (Wales), and the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly (Northern Ireland). HE provision is offered by many different types of institution that are active in teaching, research, and scholarship. The term includes all publicly funded universities and other HE institutions, alternative HE providers that offer HE courses but do not receive annual public funding, and those further education colleges in England and Wales which offer HE level courses.

Degree Awarding Powers and University Title

The power to award degrees is regulated by law in the UK. Those organisations granted the power to award HE degrees are referred to as 'Recognised Bodies', and a full list of these is published by the UK Government. It is an offence for an organisation to purport to award, or to offer a UK degree, unless it is authorised to do so. Degree-awarding bodies often work with other providers that do not have degree awarding powers to deliver provision which leads to a qualification of the degree-awarding body. The Listed Bodies Order confirms the providers that do not have the powers to award their own degrees, but offer programmes that lead to a degree of a Recognised Body (see <https://www.gov.uk/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised>).

Qualifications

There are two parallel frameworks for HE qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies, one that applies to Scotland and one that operates in the rest of the UK:

- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)
- The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS).

These frameworks are the principal national reference points for academic standards in UK HE. They meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration and thus align with A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

Quality Assurance

Academic standards are established and maintained by HE institutions themselves, using an extensive and sophisticated range of shared quality assurance approaches and structures. Standards and quality in institutions are underpinned by the use of external examiners, standards agreed and recognised by the sector, by the activities of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and in professional areas by relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The sector standards are overseen by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, formed from partner organisations, providers and national HE regulators

A cornerstone of quality arrangements across all four nations is **the UK Quality Code for Higher Education**, which was revised in 2018. The Quality Code articulates fundamental principles that apply to HE quality across the UK, irrespective of changing national contexts. It incorporates Expectations and Core Practices which are applicable to all providers in the UK, and Common Practices which only apply to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and can be accessed at <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>.

All institutions that possess degree-awarding powers of any kind must undergo quality assurance review activity as required by the relevant government:

England

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) drives the regulatory and legal requirements of HE in England. The legislation can be found at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted>. This Act established the Office for Students (OfS) and gave it responsibility for regulating the English HE sector. Its primary focus is the student interest in its duty as a market regulator. The OfS is responsible for risk-based monitoring of indicators relating to the baseline quality and standards of provision. It maintains the Register of HE providers in England, and implemented a regulatory framework in February 2018: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/>.

Degree-awarding bodies in England must be registered with the OfS and meet all ongoing conditions of registration in order to retain degree-awarding powers. The OfS has express powers to revoke degree-awarding powers for HE providers in England if conditions of registration are not maintained. The QAA is the designated body responsible for carrying out the quality and standards assessment functions for English HE, as set out in Section 23 of the HERA. Details of how the QAA carries out Quality and Standards Reviews on behalf of the OfS can be found at <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-and-standards-review>.

Northern Ireland

Funding for HE is directly provided by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is currently operating under the QAA's 2016 Higher Education Review method, with the expectation of introducing an enhancement-led model as part of any future reforms.

Scotland

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC), a non-departmental public body, is the strategic body responsible for funding Scotland's teaching and learning provision and research. Scotland takes an enhancement-led approach to quality assurance with its Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), which focuses on the whole student experience and its enhancement rather than on quality assurance alone. This is built on partnership and collective engagement between a number of bodies including the Scottish Funding Council, QAA Scotland, the National Union of Students (NUS), and Universities Scotland; for more information see <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework>. The QEF requires both rigorous institution-led review, using external reference points, and external review on a five-year cycle, known as Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR). Institutions must demonstrate how they meet the expectations of the Quality Code, which is confirmed as a formal part of ELIR.

Wales

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) is the Welsh Government sponsored body responsible for regulating the Welsh HE sector. The QAA undertakes Quality Enhancement Reviews of regulated HE providers every six years under the Wales Quality Assessment Framework. For more information, see <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/quality-enhancement-review>. Reforms involving a more unified post-compulsory education and training system, with a new Commission for tertiary education, innovation and research, are currently underway.

More information on quality assurance systems across UK higher education, including a poster that summarises the current landscape in each of the four nations, can be found on the QAA website: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/blog/what-we-mean-when-we-talk-about-quality-assurance-of-uk-he>.

Credit Systems

A number of integrated credit frameworks operate within the UK: the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), both of which are underpinned by the same principles, such as the definition of one credit as 10 notional hours of learning.

The FHEQ is a qualifications framework, based on the outcomes represented by the main qualification titles; it is not an integrated credit and qualifications framework, nor does its use depend on the use of credit. Not all degree-awarding bodies in England use credit in the same way, therefore. Some may not use credit at all, and some may use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to support student mobility within Europe and award ECTS points rather than UK credit.

Nevertheless, credit is widely used by most degree-awarding bodies in the UK. An advisory Higher Education credit framework for England has been in use since 2008. The credit framework is written for HE providers in England as a description of the typical practice developed across the sector and to provide a reference point for those wishing to introduce or consolidate their use of credit. The SCQF and the CQFW are integrated credit and qualifications frameworks, which means that they specify minimum credit volumes and levels for qualifications. The SCQF embraces all educational sectors, with the FQHEIS as a constituent part; and the CQFW is a meta-framework for credit and qualifications in Wales, embracing all post-14 education and training, and treating the FHEQ as a constituent part. The credit arrangements in the FQHEIS/SCQF apply to all degree-awarding bodies in Scotland. All degree-awarding bodies in Wales have agreed to use the credit arrangements stipulated in the CQFW, in relation to the FHEQ.

Admission

UK HE providers determine their own admissions policies and the minimum entry requirements for each programme. For Bachelor's degrees, the minimum entry requirement is usually two or three General Certificate of Education Advanced-level (GCE A level) passes, as well as a minimum number of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grade C or above. These remain the most common form of entry qualification held by young entrants to HE. Other appropriate qualifications may also provide entry, e.g. the International Baccalaureate, the Welsh Baccalaureate, Scottish Highers, Advanced Highers, or qualifications at the same levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and Edexcel BTEC National Qualifications. The Universities and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS) tariff establishes comparability between different types of qualification across the UK using a points system.

The Access to Higher Education Diploma provides another route for mature entrants. Most institutions also welcome applications from mature candidates who have had appropriate experience but may lack formal qualifications, offering credit for prior study and informal learning acquired through work or other experiences (Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)).