

Description of Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland¹, Higher Education institutions are independent, self-governing bodies active in teaching, research and scholarship and established by Royal Charter or legislation. Most are part-funded by government.

Higher Education (HE) is provided by many different types of institution. In addition to universities and university colleges, whose Charters and statutes are made through the Privy Council which advises the Queen on the granting of Royal Charters and incorporation of universities, there are a number of publicly-designated and autonomous institutions within the higher education sector. About ten per cent of higher education provision is available in colleges of further education by the authority of another duly empowered institution. Teaching to prepare students for the award of higher education qualifications can be conducted in any higher education institution or further education college.

Degree awarding powers and the title 'university':

All the universities and many of the higher education colleges have legal power to develop their own courses and award their own degrees, and determine the conditions on which they are awarded: some HE colleges and specialist institutions without these powers offer programmes, with varying extents of devolved authority, leading to the degrees of an institution which does have them. All universities in existence before 2005 have the power to award degrees on the basis of completion of taught courses and the power to award research degrees. From 2005, institutions in England and Wales that award only taught degrees ('first' and 'second cycle') and which meet certain numerical criteria, may also be permitted to use the title 'university'. Higher education institutions that award only taught degrees but which do not meet the numerical criteria may apply to use the title 'university college', although not all choose to do so.

All of these institutions are subject to the same regulatory quality assurance and funding requirements as universities; and all institutions decide for themselves which students to admit and which staff to appoint.

Degrees and other higher education qualifications are legally owned by the awarding institution, not by the state.

The names of institutions with their own degree awarding powers ("Recognised Bodies") are set out at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/annex4.shtml>

Institutions able to offer courses leading to a degree of a recognised body ("Listed Bodies") are listed by the English, Welsh and Northern Irish authorities. The list may be found at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/annex5.shtml>

Qualifications

The types of qualifications awarded by higher education institutions at sub-degree and undergraduate (first cycle) and postgraduate level (second and third cycles) are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), including qualifications descriptors, developed with the sector by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA - established in 1997 as an independent UK-wide body to monitor the standard of higher education provision - www.qaa.ac.uk). The Qualifications and

Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Qualifications Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) and the Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment, (Northern Ireland) (CCEA) have established the National Qualifications Framework, which is aligned with the FHEQ as shown opposite with typical credit values. These authorities regulate a number of professional, statutory and other awarding bodies which control qualifications at HE and other levels. Foundation degrees, designed to create intermediate awards strongly oriented towards specific employment opportunities, were introduced in 2001 and are available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In terms of the European HE Area they are "short cycle" qualifications within the first cycle.

Quality Assurance

Academic standards are established and maintained by higher education institutions themselves using an extensive and sophisticated range of shared quality assurance approaches and structures. Standards and quality in institutions are underpinned by universal use of external examiners, a standard set of indicators and other reports and by the activities of the QAA and in professional areas by relevant Professional and Statutory Bodies. This ensures that institutions meet national expectations described in the FHEQ: subject benchmark (character) statements, the Code of Practice and a system of programme specifications. QAA conducts peer-review based audits and reviews of higher education institutions with the opportunity for subject-based review as the need arises. Accuracy and adequacy of quality-related information published by the higher education institutions is also reviewed. QAA reviews also cover higher education programmes taught in further education institutions.

Credit Systems

There is a national credit system in place in Wales which embraces all post-16 education. Around 75% of institutions in England and Northern Ireland (around 85% of students) belong to credit systems consortia. There are local credit systems in some other institutions. QCA is developing a system intended for further education in England, the Framework for Achievement, designed to articulate with higher education. Many institutions use credit points for students transferring between programmes or institutions, and use ECTS for transfers within the European area and to recognise learning gained by students on exchange visits with institutions elsewhere in Europe.

Admission

The most common qualification for entry to higher education is the General Certificate of Education at 'Advanced' (A)-level (including the "advanced supplementary"). Other qualifications for entry are the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education, the kite-marked Access Certificate or other qualifications located in the National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 3 Advanced, or the equivalent according to the Credit and Qualifications Framework in Wales, including the Welsh Baccalaureate and qualifications in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. A-levels are normally taken by students in their 13th year of school or at a college of further education and comprise up to three or four specialist subjects studied in considerable depth, involving coursework and final examinations. Part-time and mature students may enter with these qualifications or alternatives with evidenced equivalent prior learning and experience. Institutions will admit students whom they believe to have the potential to complete their programmes successfully, and set their requirements for entry to particular programmes accordingly.

¹ The UK has a system of devolved government, including for higher education, to Scotland, to Wales and to Northern Ireland. This description is approved by the High Level Policy Forum which includes representatives of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Universities UK (UUK), the Standing Conference of Principals and the National Recognition Information Centre for the UK (UK NARIC).