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## Executive Summary

Text of the description of the UK national education system for the Diploma Supplement

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## Diploma Supplement – UK national description

1. Further to E-notes [E-04-10](#) and [E-04-14](#), this note provides the description of the national education system required in section eight of the Diploma Supplement.

2. Working closely with UK NARIC and the QAA, the Europe Unit has helped reach sector-wide approval of the description of the England, Wales and Northern Ireland education system. The initial draft of the description was provided by UK NARIC and the Europe Unit has coordinated all subsequent alterations and input to the text, also producing an accompanying diagram. Both these documents were approved by the High Level Policy Forum in July and are included as attachments. They are displayed on the UK NARIC website at: <http://www.naric.org.uk/ds.asp>

3. Scottish stakeholders have decided to produce a separate description of the Scottish HE system which is due to be finalised at the end of September.

## Background information

4. The Berlin ministerial Communiqué on the Bologna Process calls for ‘every student graduating as from 2005 to receive the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge’. The Supplement is a document to be issued to students by their HE institutions on graduation. It aims to describe the qualification they have received in an easily understandable way and describes the content and structure of the higher education system within which it was issued.

5. For further details on the implementation of the Diploma Supplement in the UK please contact one of the UK’s Diploma Supplement promoters:

- Stephen Adam, University of Westminster – [sjadam@msn.com](mailto:sjadam@msn.com)
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# Description of Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This national description is endorsed by the High Level Policy Forum, an informal group of higher education stakeholders. Higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is available at a variety of different levels, defined in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is provided by many different types of institutions, which carry out teaching, research and scholarship. All the universities and many of the higher education colleges are degree-awarding institutions: some colleges do not have degree-awarding powers but offer programmes leading to the degrees of an institution which does have them. All higher education institutions are active in teaching, research and scholarship.

Higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are autonomous bodies established by Royal charter or legislation and most are part-funded by government.

## Degree awarding powers and the title 'university':

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the law distinguishes the power to award degrees on the basis of completion of taught courses from the power to award research degrees. All universities in existence before 2005 have both powers. From 2005, institutions that award only taught degrees (first and second cycle) and which meet certain numerical criteria, may also be permitted to call themselves universities. Higher education institutions that award only taught degrees but which do not meet those numerical criteria may call themselves 'university colleges', although not all choose to do so. Institutions with their own degree awarding powers are listed at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/annex4.shtml>

A list of institutions recognised by the English, Welsh and Northern Irish authorities as being able to offer courses leading to a degree of a recognised body may be found at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/annex5.shtml>

## Universities

Universities are independent, self-governing bodies, empowered by a Royal charter or an Act of Parliament to develop their own courses and award their own degrees. Any amendments to their charters or status are made through the Privy Council<sup>2</sup>. The universities alone decide the degrees they offer and the conditions on which they are awarded (see also paragraph below on Quality Assurance). Degrees and other higher education qualifications are legally owned by the

<sup>1</sup> The UK has a system of devolved government, including for higher education, to Scotland, to Wales and to Northern Ireland. There is a separate Description of Higher Education in Scotland, whose system has a number of important differences from that of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> The Privy Council advises the Queen on the approval of Orders in Council including the granting of royal charters and incorporation of universities.

awarding institution, not by the state. Universities also decide which students to admit and which staff to appoint.

## Other higher education institutions

In addition to universities, there are a number of publicly-designated and autonomous institutions within the higher education sector. These include university colleges, higher education colleges and specialist institutions. University colleges can award their own taught degrees. Higher education colleges and specialist institutions without degree-awarding powers prepare their students for the qualifications of degree-awarding institutions. All of these institutions are subject to the same regulatory quality assurance and funding requirements as universities (see also paragraph below on Quality Assurance).

## Further Education colleges

About ten per cent of higher education provision is available in colleges of further education by the authority of another duly empowered institution.

## Qualifications

The types of qualifications awarded at undergraduate and graduate level in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), including qualifications descriptors, developed with the sector by the Quality Assurance Agency (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk>). The FHEQ levels are as follows:

	<b>Level</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>
1	Certificate (C level)	Certificates of Higher Education
2	Intermediate (I level)	Foundation degrees, Degree (non Honours), Diplomas of Higher Education
3	Honours (H level)	Honours (Bachelors) degrees, Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas
4	Masters (M level)	Masters degrees, Postgraduate Certificates and Postgraduate Diplomas
5	Doctoral (D level)	Doctorates

Foundation degrees, designed to create employer-relevant, intermediate professional awards, were introduced in 2001 and are available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In terms of the Bologna Process they are intermediate qualifications within the first cycle, but are not Bachelor's degrees.

## Credit Systems

There are universally applied credit systems in Northern Ireland, Wales and across further education in England. Credit systems are not universally used in English higher education institutions. Many institutions use credit points for students transferring between programmes or institutions, and use ECTS for transfers within the European area.

## Admission

The most common qualification for entry to higher education is the General Certificate of Education at 'Advanced' level (including the "advanced

supplementary") or the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education 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. 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. Mature students may enter with these qualifications or alternatives and particularly equivalent prior learning.

Requirements for particular courses are set by the admitting institution. Institutions will admit students whom they believe have the potential to complete their programmes successfully.

#### 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. Universal use of external examiners and the activities of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) underpin institutions' standards and quality and ensure that they meet national expectations. QAA was established in 1997 as an independent UK-wide body to monitor the standard of higher education provision. This monitoring principally comprises peer-review based audits and reviews of higher education institutions with the opportunity for subject based review as need arises. QAA reviews also cover higher education programmes provided by further education institutions. Accuracy and adequacy of quality-related information published by the higher education institutions are also reviewed.

# Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

# QCA/ACCAC/CCEA National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

