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Executive Summary

This E-note provides the background to the updating of the Higher Education Description for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It also provides the updated text and diagram of the Higher Education Description (EWNl).

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Updated Higher Education Description for England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Introduction

1. This Europe Note (E-Note) presents the updated Higher Education Description for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNl). It updates the last edition published in February 2005 and has been done in close consultation with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), UK NARIC, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and other sector bodies.
2. The Higher Education Description (EWNl) provides a general summary of the higher education (HE) system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, including information on its access requirements, types of institution, and qualifications structure.
3. The Higher Education Description (EWNl) forms Section 8 of the Diploma Supplement¹, and is intended to provide external parties with a general overview of the HE system in which a qualification is awarded.
4. The updated Description and accompanying Diagram are now available for use in the Diploma Supplement. In addition to this E-Note they are also available on the following websites:

Europe Unit:

Description: www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/EWNl.pdf

Diagram: www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/EWNlTable.pdf

Europass:

www.uknec.org.uk/documents/ds_description.pdf

QAA:

www.qaa.ac.uk

Background
Rationale for updating the Higher Education Description

5. In August 2008 QAA published the second edition of 'The framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England Wales and Northern

¹ The Europe Unit Guide to the Diploma Supplement: www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/GuideDS.pdf



Ireland'. The FHEQ describes the achievement represented by HE qualifications and applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates) granted by an institution in the exercise of its degree awarding powers.

The existence of the second edition, which updates the previous framework, rendered the previous Higher Education Description (EWNI) out of date.

6. Following the release of the updated FHEQ, QAA began the self-certification of the FHEQ against the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA). The self-certification was completed in February 2009². This and other developments affecting the UK HE sector, such as the merging of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, have also contributed to the need to update the Higher Education Description (EWNI).
7. In 2007, Scotland successfully self-certified its national HE framework against the FQ-EHEA. Following this, Scotland went on to update its Higher Education Description.
8. Please refer to pages three and four of this document for the Description and associated Diagram.

² http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news/media/pressReleases/FHEQ_27Feb09.asp

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. They are established by Royal Charter or legislation and 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. Publicly funded higher education provision is available in some 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 and in some further education colleges.

Degree awarding powers and the title 'university'

All universities and many higher education colleges have the legal power to develop their own courses and award their own degrees, as well as 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 available for download at: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/index.cfm?fuseaction=institutes.list&InstituteCategoryID=1>

Higher education institutions, further education colleges and other organisations able to offer courses leading to a degree of a Recognised Body are listed by the English, Welsh and Northern Irish authorities, and are known as "Listed Bodies". View the list at: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/index.cfm?fuseaction=institutes.list&InstituteCategoryID=2>

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). This also includes qualification descriptors that were developed with the HE sector by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA - established in 1997 as an independent UK-wide body to monitor the standard of higher education provision - www.qaa.ac.uk). The FHEQ was self-certified as compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, the qualifications framework

adopted as part of the Bologna Process, in February 2009. Foundation degrees, designed to create intermediate awards strongly oriented towards specific employment opportunities, were introduced in 2001. In terms of the European Higher Education Area they are "short cycle" qualifications within the first cycle. The FHEQ is one component of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW). The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Wales (DCELLS) and the Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment, Northern Ireland (CCEA) have established the Qualifications and Credit Framework (to replace, in time, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)). These authorities regulate a number of professional, statutory and other awarding bodies which control VET and general qualifications at all levels. The QCF is also incorporated into the CQFW. There is a close association between the levels of the FHEQ and the NQF (as shown overleaf), and other frameworks of the UK and Ireland (see 'Qualifications can cross Boundaries' <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/otherrefpoints/Qualsboundaries09.pdf>)

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 the universal use of external examiners, a standard set of indicators and other reports, by the activities of the QAA, and in professional areas by relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. This ensures that institutions meet national expectations described in the FHEQ: subject benchmark statements, the Code of Practice and 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. The accuracy and adequacy of quality-related information published by the higher education institutions is also reviewed. QAA also reviews publicly funded higher education provision in further education colleges.

Credit Systems

Most higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland belong to one of several credit consortia and some operate local credit accumulation and transfer systems for students moving between programmes and/or institutions. A framework of national guidelines, the Higher Education Credit Framework for England, was launched in 2008. Credit is also an integral part of the CQFW and the QCF. It may be possible for credit awarded in one framework to be recognised by education providers whose qualifications sit within a different framework. HE credit systems in use in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are compatible with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) for accumulation and transfers within the European Higher Education Area, and are used to recognise learning gained by students in institutions elsewhere in Europe.

Admission

The most common qualification for entry to higher education is the General Certificate of Education at 'Advanced' (A) level. Other appropriate NQF level 3 qualifications and the kite-marked Access to HE Diploma may also provide entry to HE. Level 3 qualifications in the CQFW, including the Welsh Baccalaureate, also provide entry, as do Scottish Highers, Advanced Highers or qualifications at the same levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. Part-time and mature students may enter HE with these qualifications or alternatives with evidenced equivalent prior formal and/or experiential learning. Institutions will admit students whom they believe to have the potential to complete their programmes successfully.

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 Business, Innovation and Skills, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE and the National Recognition Information Centre for the UK (UK NARIC).

Diagram of higher education qualification levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) ⁵		FQ-EHEA cycle	Credit		Progression for selection of students (FHEQ levels)	National Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland ⁶	
Typical Qualifications	Level		Typical UK	Typical ECTS credit ranges ³		Typical Qualifications	Level
Doctoral Degrees (eg PhD, DPhil, EdD)	8	3 rd cycle	Typically not credit rated ¹	Typically not credit rated		Vocational Qualifications Level 8	8
Masters Degrees Integrated Masters Degrees Postgraduate Diplomas Postgraduate Certificate of Education Postgraduate Certificates	7	2 nd cycle	180	60-120 ²		Fellowships NVQ Level 5 Vocational Qualifications Level 7	7
Bachelors Degrees with Honours Bachelors Degrees Professional Graduate Certificate in Education Graduate Diplomas Graduate Certificates	6	1 st cycle	360	180-240		Vocational Qualifications Level 6	6
Foundation Degrees Diplomas of Higher Education Higher National Diplomas	5	Short cycle	240	120		NVQ Level 4 Higher National Diplomas (HND) Higher National Certificates (HNC) Vocational Qualifications Level 5	5
Higher National Certificates Certificates of Higher Education	4		120			Vocational Qualifications Level 4	4
Entry to HE via equivalent experiential or prior learning							National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 Vocational Qualifications Level 3 GCE AS and A Level Advanced Diploma Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced ⁴

Levels 2, 1 and entry

¹PhD and DPhil qualifications are typically not credit-rated. Newer doctoral degrees, such as the Professional Doctorate, are sometimes credit rated, typically 540 UK credits.
²A range of 90-120 ECTS is typical of most awards
³1 ECTS credit is typically worth 2 UK credits
⁴The Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification is part of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)

⁵For students with the necessary prerequisites, entry to each FHEQ level is possible from the next lower level in the NQF or Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.
⁶These levels will also apply to the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The QCF will eventually replace the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)