

Description of Higher Education in Scotland¹

Introduction

Scotland's distinctive higher education system has 20 higher education institutions (HEIs). The 14 universities, the Open University in Scotland, 2 colleges of higher education, 2 art schools, and a conservatoire are part-funded for research, teaching and learning through the Scottish Funding Council (see www.sfc.ac.uk)

The HEIs are independent, self-governing bodies, active in teaching research and scholarship. They decide the Degrees they offer; the conditions on which they are awarded and the admissions arrangements. Degrees and other higher education qualifications are legally owned by the awarding institution, not by the state.

The HEIs offer qualifications at undergraduate (Bologna first cycle) and postgraduate (Bologna second and third cycle) levels. In Scotland, the law distinguishes the power to award degrees on the basis of completion of taught programmes from the power to award Research Degrees. Universities have powers to award taught and research Degrees. Some other HEIs have powers to award Degrees while others offer programmes leading to Degrees awarded by HEIs with Degree awarding powers.

Lists of institutions with powers to award degrees and institutions recognised by authorities in Scotland as being able to offer courses leading to a Degree of another HEI may be found at: www.universities-scotland.ac.uk.

A small number of Degrees are available in colleges of further education by the authority of a duly empowered HEI.

Qualifications

The types of qualifications awarded at undergraduate (first cycle) and postgraduate level (second and third cycles) in Scotland are described in 'The Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland' which includes qualifications descriptors, developed with the higher education sector (www.qaa.ac.uk). The Framework 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 October 2006. The Framework is also an integral part of a wider national framework: the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework that covers all forms of programmes and qualifications from school to doctorates (see Table 1 and www.scqf.org.uk).

Institutions use SCQF levels and credit points for students entering or transferring between programmes

¹ Scotland has a distinctive higher education system and also operates under a devolved government, including for higher education. There is a separate Description of Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland where the system is different to that of Scotland.

or institutions, and use ECTS for transfers within the European area.

Admission

Requirements for particular programmes are set by the HEIs which offer a range of routes for entry and/or credit transfer into their programmes, and admit students whom they believe have the potential to complete their programmes successfully. The Open University is an open entry institution.

The most common qualification for entry to higher education is the Higher or Advanced Higher or, for entrants from the rest of the UK, the General Certificate of Education at 'Advanced' level (including the "advanced supplementary") or comparable qualifications. Four or five Highers are normally taken in the 5th and 6th year of secondary school or at a college of further education and studied in considerable depth, involving coursework and final examinations. Advanced Highers are taken in the 6th year. A major route into Degrees, often with transfer of credit, is from Higher National Qualifications offered in colleges of further education.

Quality Assurance

Standards of qualification and the quality of the student learning experience are maintained by the HEIs using a range of processes including extensive use of external examiners. In some subject areas, Professional and Statutory Bodies have a role to ensure that programmes meet the needs and standards of the particular profession.

HEIs in Scotland demonstrate their public accountability for quality and standards through a national quality assurance framework that has a strong focus on enhancement as follows:

HEIs take account of a QAA published U.K.-wide code of practice for quality assurance, and U.K. subject level 'benchmark statements' on standards (see www.qaa.ac.uk).

Subject level issues are addressed by HEIs internal reviews conducted in accordance with guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council (see www.sfc.ac.uk).

External reviews are conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland (QAA Scotland). The Agency is an independent body established to provide public confidence in the quality and standards of higher education. It involves students in its quality enhancement activities. The Agency publishes reports on the outcomes of reviews and the confidence that can be placed in the HEIs' arrangements for assuring and enhancing standards and quality, and for ensuring that they provide public information that is complete, accurate and fair (see www.qaa.ac.uk).

A national development service supports students in their role as active participants in assuring and enhancing quality and standards (see www.sparqs.org.uk).

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TABLE 1

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

The SCQF covers all the major qualifications in Scotland from school to Doctorate and including work-based Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs)

SCQF Level	Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions	SQA Higher National and National Units, Courses and Group Awards	SVQs
12	Doctoral Degrees (Minimum 540 SCQF credits)		
11	Masters Degrees (Minimum 180 SCQF credits) Postgraduate Diploma (Minimum 120 SCQF credits)		SVQ 5
10	Bachelors Degree with Honours (Minimum 480 SCQF credits) Graduate Diplomas and Certificates		
9	Bachelors Degree (Minimum 360 SCQF credits) Graduate Diplomas and Certificates		
8	Diploma of Higher Education (Minimum 240 SCQF credits)	Higher National Diploma	SVQ 4
7	Certificate of Higher Education (Minimum 120 SCQF credits)	Advanced Higher Higher National Certificate	
6		Higher	SVQ 3
5		Intermediate 2 Credit Standard Grade	SVQ 2
4		Intermediate 1 General Standard Grade	SVQ 1
3		Access 3 Foundation Standard Grade	
2		Access 2	
1		Access 1	

Notes

- 1 SCQF levels represent increasing complexity and demand in learning outcome.
- 2 One credit represents the outcomes achievable by the average student though 10 notional hours of learner effort. In general terms, one full-time undergraduate year is considered to be 120 credits worth of learning. A postgraduate year is 180 credits. 1 ECTS credit is deemed equivalent to 2 SCQF credits. Research degrees - Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) are not credit rated.
- 3 Graduate Certificates (minimum of 60 SCQF credits) and Graduate Diplomas (minimum of 120 credits) are offered at levels 9 and 10 within the SCQF framework. They are offered for programmes that are for graduates but do not have outcomes that are at postgraduate level.
- 4 The Bachelors Degree (level 9) leads to employment and in some instances can give access to postgraduate study particularly when accompanied by relevant work or professional experience.
- 5 At postgraduate levels, the framework and the higher education qualifications are the same as those for the rest of the UK. The Honours Degree levels of the two frameworks are considered to be in broad alignment (the Honours Degree in Scotland normally takes 4 years and that in the rest of the UK takes 3 years). Below Honours level the frameworks reflect the different educational structures of Scotland and the rest of the UK).

This national description is endorsed by the Quality Working Group which is a national committee with members from The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Scotland; The Scottish Funding Council; Universities Scotland and the National Union of Students in Scotland.