

Description of Higher Education in Scotland

Introduction

Scotland has a distinctive higher education system and also operates under a devolved government, which includes devolved responsibility 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.

Scotland's distinctive higher education system has 19 higher education institutions (HEIs). The 15 universities, the Open University in Scotland, a college of higher education, an art school, and a conservatoire all receive funding for research and for learning and teaching through the Scottish Funding Council (see www.sfc.ac.uk); funding is also received from other sources.

The HEIs are independent, self-governing bodies, active in teaching, research and scholarship. Where HEIs are degree awarding bodies they design the curriculum for the degrees they award, set 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 (bachelors and most masters degrees) from the power to award Research (doctoral) Degrees. Most universities have powers to award taught and research Degrees. Some other HEIs have powers to award taught 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 taught Degrees are available in tertiary colleges 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 university sector and published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (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 (SCQF) 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 or institutions, and use ECTS for transfers within the European area.

Admission

Admissions 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 and, for a small number of high tariff courses, the Advanced Higher or, for entrants from the rest of the UK, the General Certificate of Education at "Advanced" level or

comparable qualifications. Pupils seeking to enter a HEI would normally take a number of Highers at an appropriate stage in the Senior Phase (4th, 5th and 6th year) of secondary school, according to the requirements of their own learning journey, or at a tertiary college. HEIs usually require 4-6 Highers for entry, but this may vary with subject. Highers are studied in considerable depth, involving coursework and final examinations. Advanced Highers have historically been taken by some pupils in S6 as a means of extending their specialisation, normally following successful completion of a Higher in that subject. They are also available in some tertiary colleges. Pupils may also take a Scottish Baccalaureate in Sciences, Languages, Expressive Arts, or Social Sciences and these consist of related Highers and Advanced Highers and an interdisciplinary project. Another major route into Degrees, often with full transfer of credit, is from Higher National Qualifications¹ offered in tertiary colleges.

Quality Assurance

The academic standards of qualifications are secured and the quality of the student learning experience enhanced by the HEIs using a range of processes including extensive use of external examiners and suitably qualified independent external individuals. In some subject areas, Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) have a role to ensure that programmes meet the needs and standards of a particular profession; PSRBs do not set or regulate the academic standards of awards, which is the responsibility of the Degree awarding body.

HEIs in Scotland demonstrate their public accountability for quality and standards through a national Quality Enhancement Framework which assures academic standards and the quality of learning experiences. It has a strong focus on enhancement as follows:

HEIs take account of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is published by the QAA. The Quality Code is a UK-wide code of practice for quality assurance and enhancement, which includes qualifications frameworks and UK subject level "benchmark statements" as well as extensive guidance on the quality of the student learning experience and provision of public information (see www.qaa.ac.uk). Higher Education providers use the Quality Code to design their respective policies for maintaining academic standards and to enhance quality. Reviewers use it as a key reference point for the external review and quality assurance of HEIs.

Subject level quality reviews are conducted by HEIs in accordance with guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council (see www.sfc.ac.uk) and in light of the Quality Code.

External reviews of HEIs are conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland (QAA Scotland). QAA Scotland is an independent body and charity established to provide public confidence in the quality and standards of higher education. The method of external review in Scotland involves teams of peer reviewers, including student and international reviewers. QAA Scotland publishes reports on the outcome of reviews and makes judgements about the effectiveness of the HEIs' arrangements for assuring academic standards and enhancing the quality of the learning experiences offered (see www.qaa.ac.uk). QAA Scotland also manages a programme of national Enhancement Themes (see www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk).

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

¹ Awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority

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