

Description of Higher Education in Scotland¹

Introduction

Scotland's distinctive higher education system has 21 higher education institutions (HEIs) (See www.hero.ac.uk). The 13 universities, the Open University in Scotland, one university college, 2 colleges of higher education, 2 art schools, and a conservatoire are part-funded for research, teaching and learning through the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. The Scottish Agricultural College is funded by the Scottish Executive's Environment and Rural Affairs Department.

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.dius.gov.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 Higher Education Qualifications in Scotland which includes qualifications descriptors, developed with the higher education sector (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk>). The Framework is 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 credit points for students entering or transferring between programmes 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 Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) (see www.shefc.ac.uk);

External reviews are conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland (QAA). 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).

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.