



Overview

Quality Assurance System
in Higher Education

United Kingdom

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I. Basic information on the country

Name of country	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland			
Capital	London			
Major language	English			
Population*	60,975,000			
Nominal GDP**	2,803,000 million USD (2007)			
Nominal GDP per capita**	46,041 USD (2007)			
Public spending on education as a percentage of the total government spending**	All levels of education (OECD average 13.4%)	11.7%	HE level (OECD average 3.1%)	2.3%
Public spending on education as a percentage of GDP**	All levels of education (OECD average 5.4%)	5.3%	HE level (OECD average 1.3%)	1.0%
Spending per student at higher education level**	11,484 USD			
Public spending on higher education per student**	7,993 USD			
Progression rate into higher education***	English domiciled students, aged 17-30 2000/01 - 40% 2005/06 - 43%			
Organization of education system***	See II-2. Organization of the education system, page 8.			
Cycle of academic year****	<p>The full academic year for higher education runs from 1 August to 31 July. Organization of the teaching year is at the discretion of the individual institution. Although the organization of teaching traditionally reflected this three-term system, institutions are increasingly organizing their teaching along the two-semester system.</p> <p>Several universities have introduced courses that run twice a year, with two different start dates: in autumn (as normal) and also in spring.</p>			

Source:

* *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan: Overview of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*
www.mofa.go.jp

** *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT): International Comparative Education Statistics 2008-2009*

*** *Universities UK: Higher Education in Facts and Figures, Summer 2008*

**** *European Commission: Eurydice - The Education System in England, Wales, Northern Ireland 2007/08*
www.eurydice.org/

II. The higher education system

1. History of UK higher education

1) Historical overview

The first universities evolved

The first universities, those of Oxford and Cambridge, evolved as private bodies during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although other bodies, such as the Inns of Court (law) and Royal Colleges of Medicine and Surgery, became increasingly important as providers of professional training and regulation of competence, it was not until the nineteenth and early twentieth century that the major civic universities were founded in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These remained private foundations, albeit with occasional government financial aid.

In the first half of the twentieth century, a number of university colleges developed, catering mainly to local students taking University of London external degrees. These subsequently became universities in their own right.

University education in Scotland also has a long history. Four universities - St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh, known collectively as the four ancient Scottish universities, - were founded in the 15th and 16th centuries. Four further universities were formally established as independent universities between 1964 and 1967.

Expansion in higher education - the latter half of 20th century

The Barlow Report (1946) recommended a doubling of university student numbers, especially in science subjects, to meet the need for scientific manpower. Both government subsidy for universities and student numbers greatly increased in the immediate postwar period.

The Robbins Report of 1963, published by the Committee on Higher Education, recommended substantial expansion in higher education. It expressed the view that 'courses of higher education should be available to all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so'. The principles and recommendations of the Robbins Report formed the basis for the development of the university sector for subsequent years. Then, a number of 'new universities' were founded in the 1960s. (Note: In more recent years, the term 'new universities' has come to denote institutions which gained university title since 1992.)

Many institutions had been originally set up by charitable endowment to enable working-class men and women to advance their general knowledge and industrial skills on a part- or full-time basis. Such institutions, known as polytechnics, were later maintained and regulated by local authorities.

Other higher education institutions were originally established as colleges for training teachers. A significant number of these were provided by churches. They were subsequently maintained and regulated by local authorities.

The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was established in 1964 for the validation of programmes at higher education institutions, such as polytechnics and higher education colleges, which did not have their own degree-awarding powers.

1986 - RAE initiated

The first Research Assessment Exercise was carried out in 1986 to provide ratings of the quality of research conducted in universities and higher education colleges in the UK. The ratings are used to inform allocation of funds by the higher education funding bodies. Further RAEs were carried out in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001, and 2008.

The Education Reform Act 1988

Under the Education Reform Act 1988, polytechnics and higher education colleges in England and Wales were no longer under local authority control, and became autonomous institutions. The Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) and the Universities Funding Council (UFC) were created. The PCFC funded over 50 polytechnics and colleges previously funded by local education authorities. The UFC funded all 52 universities in the UK.

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992

The Act dissolved PCFC and UFC, and created new bodies to fund all higher education institutions in their respective areas of the UK: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE); Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC); and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). Since April 1993, these bodies have funded all higher education institutions in the UK.

In England and Wales there remained a 'binary divide' between the university sector and the public/polytechnic sector. However, as universities began to offer vocational courses and work alongside business and their local communities, and non-university institutions undertook scholarship and research, the distinction between them became increasingly blurred.

Consequently, the Act abolished the division between universities and polytechnics, ending the binary divide in higher education.

It dissolved CNAA and enabled the former polytechnics to gain degree-awarding powers and to use the word 'university' in their title. Other higher education institutions were able to apply to the Privy Council for taught degree-awarding powers, research degree-awarding powers and university title.

1997 - The Dearing Report

During the early 1990s, despite a rapid expansion of the higher education sector, public funding for institutions fell by around 25 per cent per student, putting considerable pressure on universities and colleges. In 1994, faced with increasing demand for higher education, the government imposed a ceiling on growth in full-time undergraduate student numbers.

Against this background, in May 1996, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education

was established to make recommendations on the purposes, shape, size and funding of higher education. The Committee, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, first took the fundamental review of higher education since the Robbins Report of 1963, and reported in 1997. Key themes and recommendations included:

- A new 'compact' for higher education between the state, individuals and their families, graduates and institutions in which each should contribute to, and receive benefits from, higher education.
- An increase and widening of participation, mainly through two-year courses of higher education provided in colleges of further education.
- Implementation of measures to improve standards in teaching and to ensure the comparability of qualifications.
- Greater emphasis on the regional role of universities and colleges.
- The ability of universities and colleges to govern and manage themselves to obtain maximum efficiency and effectiveness.
- Support of excellence in research.

The Committee also made a number of recommendations concerning the funding of higher education, including a proposal that full-time students in higher education should pay some of the costs of their tuition fees. The government response to the Dearing Report was published in 1998.

1997 - QAA established

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education. It is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the main higher education funding councils.

The Higher Education Act 2004

In October 2001, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) announced a wide-ranging and fundamental review to help the higher education sector improve and expand. This announcement was followed up in January 2003, by the White Paper, 'The Future of Higher Education', which set out the government's strategy for the reform of higher education in England, as well as a number of measures which would affect the rest of the UK. The strategy focused on packages of measures in six key areas:

- Strengthening research through increased spending
- Improving links between higher education and business
- Promoting excellence in teaching in higher education through the creation of new professional standards and a new national body
- Continuing to expand higher education to increase participation towards 50 per cent
- Ensuring fair access to higher education for young people from lower-income families
- Reforming funding through the introduction of a new graduate contribution scheme

The Higher Education Act 2004 legislated for these proposals. The Act allowed higher education

institutions in England to charge variable tuition fees of up to £3,000 per year, rising only with inflation until an independent review is undertaken in 2009. The Act also introduced new arrangements for student support, allowing students to take out a tuition fee loan for the full amount of their fees, and providing a means-tested maintenance grant.

One of the Government's main aims for higher education is to raise and widen participation. The Act established the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in England. OFFA is an independent body, separate from, but supported by, HEFCE. The main role of OFFA is to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for under-represented groups, in the light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-07. Any institution that intends to charge the maximum tuition fee needs an 'Access Agreement' approved by the Director of OFFA. Although OFFA covers England only, there are similar arrangements in place in Northern Ireland.

Following the White Paper of 2003, which proposed the creation of a Teaching Quality Academy, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was set up in 2004 to work with the UK higher education community to enhance the student experience. The HEA has worked with institutions and professional bodies to develop national professional standards in higher education teaching.

2) Recent developments: 2007 to the present

DIUS created

A new government department with responsibility for higher education, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), was created in June 2007 with the mission to invest in science and research, skills and innovation to secure the future prosperity of the UK. DIUS bring together responsibilities for higher education previously held by DfES and the Department of Trade and Industry. DIUS had six Departmental Strategic Objectives:

- Improving skills
- Building social and community cohesion
- Pursuing excellence in research and knowledge
- Accelerating commercial exploitation of creativity and knowledge
- Strengthening further and higher education
- Encouraging science and innovation in the public sector

These departmental objectives support the wider government objectives set out in DIUS' two Public Service Agreements (PSAs). PSAs are agreed targets that define the key improvements that the public can expect government to deliver for the period from April 2008 until March 2011.

- PSA 2: Improve the skills of the population, on the way to ensuring a world-class skills base by 2020
- PSA 4: Promote world-class science and innovation in the UK

With regard to the Objective 'Strengthening further and higher education', DIUS launched a wide-ranging debate on the future of higher education, seeking contributions from individuals,

higher education organizations and employers. This debate will result in the publication of a new HE framework for England setting out a vision for higher education over the next 10 to 15 years.

BIS created

In June 2009, the government created a new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), whose role is to build Britain's capabilities to compete in the global economy. The new Department was created by merging the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) and DIUS to form a single department committed to building Britain's future economic strength.

BIS is the institutional realization of the approach to promoting British competitiveness and productivity as set out in the White Paper 'Building Britain's Future: New Industry, New Jobs', produced jointly by BERR and DIUS in April 2009.

In November 2009, the Government has unveiled a new framework for the future success of higher education, setting out the important role universities will play in securing the country's economic recovery and long term prosperity. The higher education framework, Higher Ambitions, sets out a strategy for universities to remain world class, providing the nation with the high level skills needed to remain competitive, while continuing to attract the brightest students and researchers. Key measures set out in the framework include:

- More competition between universities, giving greater priority to programmes that meet the need for high level skills;
- Business to be more engaged in the funding and design of programmes, sponsorship of students, and work placements;
- Creating more part-time, work-based and foundation degrees to make it easier for adults to go to university, with routes from apprenticeships through to Foundation Degrees and other vocational programmes;
- Encouraging universities to consider contextual data in admissions, as one way of ensuring that higher education is available to all young people who have the ability to benefit;
- Universities setting out clearly what students can expect in terms of the nature and quality of courses offered;
- Sustaining our world class research base by continuing to focus on excellence, concentrating research funding where needed to secure critical mass and impact; and
- Encouraging collaboration between universities on world class research, especially in high cost science.

Source: European Commission: Eurydice - The Education System in England, Wales, Northern Ireland 2007/08 www.eurydice.org/

European Commission: Eurydice - The Education System in Scotland 2007/08 www.eurydice.org/

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): Higher Education in the United Kingdom, 2005

Department for Education and Skills (DfES): The future of higher education, 2003

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS): Departmental Report 2009, 2009

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) Website: Announcements - New Department for Business, Innovation & Skills to lead fight against recession and build now for future prosperity http://www.dius.gov.uk/news_and_speeches/announcements/bis

Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS): Higher Ambitions, 2009

2. Organization of the educational system

A wide range of institutions will deliver courses at each level - from schools and colleges to further education colleges and universities. These levels - primary, secondary, 16 to 19, further education and higher education - are broadly explained below.

Higher education	'Higher education' is provided by a number of universities, higher education colleges and a small number of university colleges.
Further education	Further education colleges and many six form centres provide various courses for students of all ages.
16 to 19 education	Post-16 education provision is provided by a number of institutions - many secondary schools will provide 'tertiary education' for ages 16+ to 18+. Provision is also available from six form colleges or tertiary colleges (England and Wales only) and also further education colleges.
Secondary education	'Secondary education' is compulsory across the UK between 11 and 16. (In England, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has confirmed plans to raise the 'schools leaving age' in England to 18 by 2013.) Most pupils will move from a primary school to a secondary school at age 11, although in some areas there are middle schools that cater to children from the age of 8 or 9 to 12 or 13.
Primary education	'Primary education' is compulsory between the ages of 5 and 11 in England, Wales and Scotland (4 and 11 in Northern Ireland).

Concerning the Diagram of education system in each administrative part of the UK, the following information in the Eurybase (www.eurydice.org/) will be useful:

For England, Wales, Northern Ireland - *Eurybase: The Education System in England, Wales, Northern Ireland 2007/08*, '6. Higher Education', page 1

For Scotland - *Eurybase: The Education System in Scotland*, '6. Tertiary Level Education', page 79.

Source: *Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO): Structure of education provision in the United Kingdom* www.hero.ac.uk

3. Types of institution

1) Overview

Universities

Universities are diverse, ranging in size, mission, subject mix and history. They are self-governing and independent. In England, the older universities were established by Royal Charter or statute or Act of Parliament. The Privy Council has the power to grant university status to an institution that has necessary characteristics.

Former polytechnics were given the status of universities under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. These are sometimes called 'new' universities, although many of them have their origins in vocational colleges that have a long history. The existing 'old' universities include many founded in the 1950s and 1960s, the 'civic' universities, founded by Royal Charter in major cities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the first colleges of the University of Wales, which were established in the 19th and early and mid 20th centuries.

Universities have their own degree-awarding powers. They range in size from under 4,500 students to over 32,000 students. The combined schools and colleges of the University of London have over 124,000 students; and the Open University, whose part-time students study by distance learning, is even larger with over 158,000 students.

There is one privately funded university – the University of Buckingham, which provides courses mainly in business, information systems and law.

Colleges

Higher education colleges also vary in size, mission, subject mix and history. Like universities, they are self-governing and independent. Some colleges were founded up to 150 years ago, and a significant number were established as church colleges. Some award their own degrees and other qualifications; in other colleges, qualifications are validated by a university or national accrediting body.

Higher education colleges with degree awarding powers and over 4,000 students are eligible to apply for university title. Smaller colleges with degree awarding powers can apply to the Privy Council for the right to use the title of 'university college'.

Colleges range in size from small specialist institutions with 460 students, to large multi-discipline institutions of 13,700 students. The average size of higher education colleges in the UK is 3,500 students. Many colleges cover a wide range of subjects, while some specialise in one or two areas, such as art and design, dance and drama, agriculture, or nursing.

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): Higher Education in the United Kingdom, 2005

2) Statistics

Number of institutions (As of August 2008)

	Higher Education Institutions	Universities*
England	133	90
Scotland	20	14
Wales	12	3
Northern Ireland	4	2
UK total	169	109

* Federal institutions such as the University of Wales and the University of London are counted as one university. This list excludes foreign higher education institutions operating in the UK. The Open University operates in all countries of the UK; its headquarters is based in England.

Number of students (by mode of study, 2007/08)

	Undergraduates		Postgraduates		All
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	
England	1,011,955	493,060	206,865	210,300	1,922,180
Scotland	123,290	35,620	26,320	24,955	210,180
Wales	66,810	35,475	11,405	11,855	125,540
Northern Ireland	29,950	8,810	3,790	5,645	48,200
UK total	1,232,005	572,965	248,380	252,755	2,306,105

Academic staff at higher education institutions (by grade, 2006/07)

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Professors	14,915	1,570	16,485
Senior lecturers & researchers	28,970	4,680	33,650
Lecturers	31,145	20,785	51,930
Researchers	30,770	5,970	36,740
Other grades	7,880	23,310	31,190
Total	113,685	56,310	169,995

Source: *Universities UK: Higher Education in Facts and Figures, Summer 2008*

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA): Students data by institution, table0, 2007/08; Staff data tables, Summary of academic staff (excluding atypical) in all UK institutions, 2006/07
http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/component/option,com_datatables/Itemid,121/

4. Admission

Determination of student numbers

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, overall student numbers for the higher education sector as a whole are determined by the government. The higher education funding bodies make allocations to institutions to meet overall student number plans and set targets for student numbers to institutions. The purpose of these targets is to ensure that institutions deliver teaching activity for the funding provided.

For a few subject areas, there is a greater degree of central control. Undergraduate medical and dental courses are subject to quotas, in order to ensure that the number of medical and dental students required to meet national needs is delivered. Nursing and midwifery provision is largely funded by the health authorities which contract with institutions for the delivery of specified numbers of trainee nurses and midwives.

Entry/admission requirements

The traditional requirement for entry to degree study is two or three General Certificate of Education Advanced-level (GCE A-level) passes, as well as a minimum number of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grade C or above. These remain the most common form of entry qualification held by young entrants to higher education. However, many entrants to higher education are now older (over 21) and many such mature entrants hold other qualifications.

A wide range of other qualifications is acceptable for entry. They include GCE A-levels in applied subjects (formerly Vocational Certificates of Education (VCEs), Edexcel BTEC National Qualifications and the International Baccalaureate. In Wales, a Welsh Baccalaureate qualification is available in several schools and colleges; the Advanced qualification is also acceptable for entry to higher education institutions.

Access courses provide another route, particularly for mature entrants. These programmes were originally designed for students over the age of 21 without formal qualifications but, since 2003-04, the lower age limit has been reduced to 19. Some access courses provide guaranteed entry to specific undergraduate courses on successful completion.

Most institutions also welcome applications from mature candidates who have had appropriate experience but may lack formal qualifications. Many institutions give credit for prior study and informal learning acquired through work or other experiences (Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)).

It is the individual institution that determines the admissions requirements for each programme. These requirements are set out in the institution's undergraduate prospectus. Many courses require some or all of the qualifications for entry to be in specific subjects or range of subjects and at specific grades. Institutions and programmes vary in terms of the competition for places. For some highly oversubscribed programmes, such as medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and law,

applicants may be required to take an additional admissions test. Examples of such tests include the Bio Medical Admissions Test and the UK Clinical Aptitude Test.

In 2002, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) introduced a points scoring system for expressing entry requirements to higher education. The 'UCAS Tariff' establishes agreed comparability between different types of qualifications including Scottish and Irish qualifications, the Welsh Baccalaureate, the International Baccalaureate and some vocational qualifications. However, higher education institutions are not obliged to express their entry requirements in these terms.

In all cases it is the individual institution which decides which applicants will be offered a place.

Admissions procedures

UCAS is the single clearing-house for applications for admission to full-time undergraduate (first cycle) courses at all higher education institutions in the UK. UCAS is a company limited by guarantee and a charity. UCAS does not set admissions requirements or decide on the admission of individual students, but provides information to prospective students on the choice of course, institution and entry qualifications normally required.

Applications must be made to UCAS by 15 January for entry the following September (by 15 October for applications to Oxford or Cambridge universities, or to courses of medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine). Applicants may only submit one UCAS application form in each year's application cycle, although the application form may include up to five courses (only four for medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine or veterinary science courses).

As well as grades obtained in nationally recognized qualifications, the application form requires a personal statement from the applicant and a reference which assesses the applicant's suitability for higher education. Students who wish to enter higher education straight from school or college apply before they have obtained their final qualifications, and the school or college reference therefore includes predicted grades. Based on this information, and sometimes after interviewing applicants, each institution named on an application form decides whether to make an offer. If the applicant has not yet obtained their qualifications, the offer will be conditional, and will specify the grades that must be obtained. When examination results are published in mid-August, the institution confirms the offer of a place if the applicant has met the conditions. If the applicant holds no offers, or if the offer(s) are not confirmed, she/he is eligible for 'Clearing', a UCAS service that matches applicants without places to courses with vacancies.

UCAS does not handle applications for part-time or postgraduate courses; for these programmes applicants must apply direct to the institution.

In Scotland, the usual entry requirement for higher education courses is a group of awards at grades A-C in the National Qualifications Higher or Advanced Higher level examinations set by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), or qualifications deemed by a higher education institution to be equivalent to these. For many higher education courses the candidate needs to hold awards at

specified levels. Awards in GCSE and GCE Advanced Level (or the equivalent) are also accepted. For some higher education courses, particularly Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND), a group of appropriate National Certificate (NC) awards (often achieved in college courses) may be acceptable.

UCAS processes most applications for entry to higher education institutions in Scotland. It distributes them to the individual institutions and enables candidates to apply to several institutions on one form. For some courses, for example in art and design and in social work, there are other arrangements, which are detailed in the Entrance Guide to Higher Education in Scotland. Applications from outside Scotland to pursue a higher education course are considered individually to ascertain the acceptability of entry qualifications.

The higher education institutions welcome applications from mature students (defined as applicants over the age of 21) as well as from school leavers. A range of specially designed courses prepare adults both for higher education in general and for particular courses. Such "access" courses include a range of SQA units or courses, successful completion of which may lead to an SQA award. Many "access" courses guarantee a place in higher education on successful completion.

*Source: European Commission: Eurydice - The Education System in England, Wales, Northern Ireland 2007/08
www.eurydice.org/*

European Commission: Eurydice - The Education System in Scotland 2007/08 www.eurydice.org/

5. Courses and qualifications

1) Courses

Undergraduate courses

The normal minimum age for an undergraduate to start a course is 18, or 17 in Scotland. First degree courses generally take three years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Sandwich courses, which include periods of practical work in organizations outside the university or college, usually last four years, as do certain specialist courses. Some vocational degrees require longer educational training years, for example medicine, dentistry and architecture. In Scotland undergraduate programmes are offered both on a three-year basis, leading to a general degree, and on a four-year basis, leading to an honours degree.

Postgraduate courses

Postgraduate courses vary greatly. They can be taught, or conducted through research programmes, or a combination of both, and can be part-time or full-time. Postgraduate taught programmes usually last one year full-time or two years part-time. Research programmes normally last three years for full-time students and over four years for part-time students. These normally require the student to complete a written thesis.

In 2001, alternatives to traditional PhD courses introduced. The programmes will be completed over three to four years, and will combine a specific research project with a coherent programme of formal coursework in the chosen subject area and training in research. Students will also have the opportunity to develop the personal qualities and advanced skills necessary to make them attractive to prospective employers or enable them to enter an academic career.

2) Credits

Credits are awarded to students who have shown that they have successfully completed a module, unit or qualification, which means students need to meet the specific set of learning outcomes for the unit, module or qualification. Also, a student must reach the minimum standard, known as the threshold or pass, in the assessment(s). The minimum standard expected for a pass is set out in a higher education institution's assessment regulations.

The case of England

The credit value indicates both 'how much' learning (the *amount*) is expected and 'how hard' it is (the relative *level of difficulty*).

'how much' - The amount of learning indicated by a credit value is based on an estimate that is worked out using the idea of notional hours of learning. The number of notional hours indicates how long it will take for a typical student to achieve these learning outcomes. All types of learning are included in the estimate of notional hours of learning, including formal classes, self study, revision and assessment. UK higher education institutions that use credit as a unit of academic performance have agreed that one credit represents 10 notional hours of learning.

'how hard' - Eight credit levels are used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; of these levels 4 to 8 represent the types of work undertaken in higher education: the credit level of 8 is typical of the learning expected of a doctorate; 7 - a masters degree; 6 - the last part of a bachelors degree; 5 - the last part of a Foundation Degree; middle part of a bachelors degree; and 4 the first part of HE study. Higher education institutions use credit level descriptors to help work out the level of learning in individual modules and units.

3) Qualifications

Undergraduate level

The main undergraduate qualification awarded by higher education institutions is the first degree commonly known as a bachelors degree. Other undergraduate qualifications include: Higher National Diploma (HND), Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE) which usually take one or two years to complete. Foundation degrees were launched in 2001; they take two years to complete and are mainly vocational.

Graduate level

Qualifications include diplomas and certificates, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE); masters degrees, for example Master of Science (MSc); and doctorates, for example, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

Some example of qualifications

		Examples
Undergraduate qualifications	Vocational qualifications	Higher National Diploma (HND) Higher National Certificate (HNC)
	Foundation degrees	
	First degrees	Bachelor of Arts (BA) Bachelor of Science (BSc)
Postgraduate qualifications	Diplomas and certificates	Postgraduate Diploma (PG Dip) Postgraduate Certificate (PG Cert)
	Masters degrees	Master of Arts (MA) Master of Science (MSc)
	Doctorates	Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Qualifications frameworks

National qualifications frameworks for the UK higher education have been in existence since 2001. There are two types - one in Scotland and the other covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have been developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

The two qualification frameworks describe the main attributes of the major higher education qualifications -the levels of achievement they represent. The frameworks are designed to ensure that universities use the titles of qualifications consistently and as a tool to ensure that they assign the appropriate level to new qualifications that they are developing. They therefore provide a crucial set of points of reference for setting and assessing the standards of their courses. In this way they also assist external examiners and QAA reviewers. They are also intended as a guide for prospective students and employers so they can see how different qualifications relate to one another and thus what might be the next step in their progression.

4) Transcripts

Each higher education institution can provide its student with a record of their accumulated credits. In many cases this is in the form of a transcript that is produced annually, on completion of the programme, or both. This record can be a particularly useful document for students who want to take a break from learning and return to study later, or transfer their credits.

The forms of these transcripts vary. However, as part of the Bologna Process, which aims to create

greater consistency and compatibility within European higher education, all UK higher education institutions are now moving towards issuing the European Diploma Supplement. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, higher education institutions began to introduce the Diploma Supplement from 2004/05 and the majority of institutions now issue it.

5) Degree awarding powers

In the UK, higher education academic qualifications are not national awards, but are granted by individual institutions. All universities have the legal power to develop their own courses and award their own degrees, and determine the conditions on which they are awarded. Some higher education 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.

6) Student assessment - to test intended learning outcomes

In higher education, 'assessment' describes any processes that appraise an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills. There are many different forms of assessment, serving a variety of purposes. The 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Section 6: Assessment of students', developed by QAA, states that good assessment practice is designed to ensure that, in order to pass the module or programme, students have to demonstrate they have achieved the intended learning outcomes. It provides a series of precepts considered important in designing and implementing assessments of student achievement of intended learning outcomes.

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): Higher Education in the United Kingdom, 2005

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): Academic credit in Higher Education in England, 2006

*European Commission: Eurydice - The Education System in England, Wales, Northern Ireland 2007/08
www.eurydice.org/*

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Section 6: Assessment of students, 2006

Universities UK, Quality and standards in UK universities: A guide to how the system works, 2008

6. Responsible authorities and higher education related bodies

Government departments

Government departments are responsible for overall public policy towards higher education. They are the source of the public funds that support higher education institutions.

- In England: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) >> www.bis.gov.uk

- In Scotland: The Scottish Government >> www.scotland.gov.uk
- In Wales: The Welsh Assembly Government >> www.wales.gov.uk
- In Northern Ireland: Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) >> www.delni.gov.uk

Higher education funding councils

In England, Scotland and Wales, government funds are distributed by higher education funding councils. They act as intermediaries between Government departments and higher education institutions.

- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) >> www.hefce.ac.uk
- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) >> www.hefcw.ac.uk
- Scottish Funding Council (SFC) >> www.sfc.ac.uk

Representative organizations

- Universities UK (UUK) >> www.universitiesuk.ac.uk
UUK promotes and supports the work of UK universities.
- GuildHE >> www.guildhe.ac.uk
Represents higher education colleges in England and Northern Ireland.
- Higher Education Wales >> www.hew.ac.uk
Represents higher education institutions in Wales.
- Universities Scotland >> www.universities-scotland.ac.uk
Represents higher education institutions in Scotland.

Quality assurance organization

- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) >> www.qaa.ac.uk

*Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): Higher Education in the United Kingdom, 2005
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): An introduction to QAA, 2009*

7. Student unions

A students' union is a student organization dedicated to managing the social and organizational activities of the student body. Many students' unions are run by students for students, independent of the university. The purpose of the organization is to represent students' views within the university and sometimes on local and national issues. It is also responsible for providing a variety of services to students. Students can get involved in its management, through numerous and varied committees, councils and general meetings, or become one of its elected officers. Typical posts include president and vice president, treasurer and secretary, social committee and publicly posts and officers or representatives for women, men, equal opportunities.

Not all universities are part of the National Union of Students (NUS), but most have a union. NUS is a voluntary membership organization which makes a real difference to the lives of students and its member students' unions. It is a confederation of 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 percent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through its member students' unions, it represents the interests of more than seven million students.

Source: Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO): Student unions www.hero.ac.uk

National Union of Students (NUS): About NUS www.nus.org.uk

8. Tuition fees

Tuition fees charged to full-time undergraduate (first cycle) home and EU students are regulated by government. Fees charged to part-time students, all overseas students and all postgraduate students are not regulated and are determined by the institution. Under the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, full-time undergraduate students beginning a course in the academic year 1998/99 were required for the first time to pay means-tested tuition fees.

Since September 2006, universities and colleges have been able to charge new students a maximum of around £3,000 a year for their courses. Not all universities will charge this maximum amount - fees charged may vary from university to university or even from course to course.

For 2008 entry, universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have charged new students up to £3,145 a year for their courses. In Scotland, universities and colleges have not charged tuition fees for full-time courses to those already living in Scotland. (For those not already living in Scotland a fixed rate fee of around £1,735 a year (£2,760 for medical courses) applies). The maximum fee charged does not rise by more than the rate of inflation before 2010 at the earliest.

Source: European Commission: Eurydice - The Education System in England, Wales, Northern Ireland 2007/08 www.eurydice.org/

Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO): Expenses www.hero.ac.uk

9. Financial support for students

The main sources of help for full-time students are student loans, non-repayable grants, and bursaries from universities and colleges.

Student Loans

All eligible students can get help with tuition fees and living costs through Student Loans. Students will be able to take out two student loans per academic year: a Student Loan for Tuition Fees, and a Student Loan for Maintenance (living costs). Loans are provided by the Student Loans Company, or the Students Awards Agency in Scotland.

Student Loan for Tuition Fees: Students will not have to find the money to pay for their fees either before or during their studies. Instead, all eligible full-time students can get a Student Loan for Tuition Fees of up to £3,145 a year to meet their course costs. This is a non-commercial loan from the Government. The money is paid directly to their college or university on their behalf and they only have to start repaying it once they have left and are earning over £15,000 a year.

Student Loan for Maintenance: How much students can get depends on where they decide to live and study, as well as their income and that of their household. It will also depend on how much of the Maintenance Grant they are entitled to.

Maximum student loans for maintenance in England

	Maximum annual loan available
If a student lives away from his/her parents' home and (s)he studies in London	£6,475
If a student lives away from his/her parents' home and (s)he studies outside London	£4,625
If a student lives at his/her parents' home	£3,580

Non-repayable grants

This is non-repayable maintenance grants to help with general living costs and available to those new full-time students entering higher education. The amount of the grants varies according to student's household income. In England, income thresholds for non-repayable maintenance grants from September 2008 have been increased substantially. New full-time students with a household income of £25,000 or less are eligible for the full grant of £2,835 per year, with partial grants available to those with a household income of up to £60,005.

Bursaries from universities and colleges

Bursaries are non-repayable support offered by a university or college which students belong to. A typical bursary can be around £1,000 and this is additional to the financial help from the government.

Grants for part-time students

The main sources of financial help for part-time students are different from those available to full-time students. Depending on their circumstances, they may be able to apply for the part-time fee grant and course grant. How much they can get depends on their household income and personal circumstances.

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): Higher Education in the United Kingdom, 2005

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS): How to get financial help as a student 2008/09, 2007

Directgov - Education and learning: Student finance www.direct.gov.uk

10. Modes of study

Courses offered by UK universities and colleges can often be studied in a number of different ways - as a full-time student, a part-time student or by distance learning.

Full-time study

Timetabled hours (those taken up with scheduled lectures, seminars, tutorials etc.) will vary from course to course. Hours may also vary from term to term (or from year to year) as teaching elements or modules change. As well as timetabled hours, many courses will stipulate a required number of self-directed study hours that are deemed necessary to succeed in the course.

Part-time study or flexible study

Not all higher education courses are available on a part-time basis, but a good many are. This is particularly true of postgraduate, vocational and non-degree courses.

Distance learning

The growth of the internet has enabled many people (from both the UK and around the world) to study with UK universities and colleges through distance learning. Many institutions provide online university classes and courses. Distance learning courses are available at many levels, including degree and postgraduate qualifications.

Source: Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO): choosing your mode of study www.hero.ac.uk

11. Legislations

- Education Reform Act 1988
- Further and Higher Education Act 1992
- Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992
- Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998
- Higher Education Act 2004
- Higher Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005
- Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005

III. The quality assurance system

1. Summary of the UK quality assurance system

The UK higher education is characterized by a diversity and complexity of the system. There are four systems, one in each of the administrative parts of the UK: in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The differences in the systems are real and they reflect different national settings and structures, but the similarities across the UK are greater, especially in relation to the principles that underpin responsibilities for quality assurance, that is, each higher education institution has the responsibility for assuring the quality of the education it provides and the standards of the qualification it offers.

Institutions have their own internal quality assurance processes to address their responsibilities, principally, through the design and approval, monitoring and review of their programmes, and also in the assessment of students' learning and achievements. In addition, they are expected to have externality in their internal processes. This is through the involvement of external experts in the approval of their programmes and the involvement of external examiners in the assessment of their students' learning.

Thus, the assurance of standards and quality in the UK is led by the higher education institutions themselves. In addition, they are externally checked and assured by QAA's schemes and other initiatives.

The underlying principle for external quality assurance is that it should provide public confidence that higher education institutions are exercising their responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of what they are offering. External review activities are one component in the quality assurance framework (non-legislative), which comprises four elements:

- Institutional audits and reviews
- The academic infrastructure
- Published information about quality and standards in individual institution
 - Teaching quality information
- Student surveys

Besides these elements, a number of external quality assurance schemes have been undertaken by the funding bodies, the Higher Education Academy, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and other related bodies.

*Source: National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE), University Evaluation Forum, Presentation by Carolyn Campbell, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008
Universities UK, Quality and standards in UK universities: A guide to how the system works, 2008*

2. Internal quality assurance

Each university is a degree awarding body in its own right and is responsible for its own quality and standards. Individual universities have the primary, longstanding and legal responsibility for managing their quality to ensure that their students have a good experience and for maintaining standards to protect the value and currency of awards. Universities fulfill their responsibilities for assuring standards and quality through:

- regulations for awarding degrees and other qualifications;
- procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of the courses of study they offer;
- the assessment of students, which includes making use of external examiners;
- mechanisms designed to engage and involve students, with the aim of involving them as 'co-creators in their own learning', in all aspects of quality assurance;
- responding to feedback and interaction with students, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies;
- exchanging good practice, and dialogue with other universities and QAA, and participation in collective quality initiatives; and
- cooperation with the QAA and funding council requirements for regular institutional review, including the provision of publicly available information.

Each university discharges these responsibilities with reference to the QAA Code of Practice and QAA, in turn, checks how they do this through its review process which results in a published statement about the degree of confidence that can be placed in each university's ability to manage standards and quality.

External examiners

All UK universities have long made use of a network of independent and impartial academic advisers, called external examiners. External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining nationally comparable standards within autonomous higher education institutions, the external examiner being one of a number of independent and impartial advisers used by them. The mechanisms employed by institutions to maintain and enhance academic standards will vary, depending on individual mission, size, curriculum structures and other factors. However, that all institutions will use external examiners to help them monitor the academic standards of their awards, except those granted on an honorary basis. External examiners provide institutions with informed comment on the standards set and student achievement in relation to those standards.

External examiners are drawn from other institutions, or from areas of relevant professional practice. External examiners report to the Vice-Chancellor of the university on whether the standards set are appropriate, by referring both to their experience of standards in other universities, and to the academic infrastructure established by the QAA. External examiner reports have significant status within the university. They are directed to the Vice-Chancellor and are considered at, and used by, the department and university in internal quality assurance

committees.

Source: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Code of practice for the academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 4: External examining, 2004

Universities UK, Quality and standards in UK universities: A guide to how the system works, 2008

3. External quality assurance framework

1) Institutional audits and reviews

In addition to their own systems for safeguarding standards and enhancing the quality of their provision, universities are also subject to a rigorous external review process conducted by QAA. The QAA undertakes regular, formal, external reviews of universities, called 'Institutional Audit' in England and Northern Ireland, 'Institutional Review' in Wales, and 'Enhancement-led Institutional Review' in Scotland. The characteristics and differences among these reviews are indicated below:

Review

- England/N. Ireland: Institutional audit
- Scotland: Enhancement-led institutional review
- Wales: Institutional review

Target and cycle

- England/N. Ireland: involving all universities and colleges of higher education on a six-year cycle
- Scotland: involving all universities over a four-year cycle
- Wales: involving all universities over a six-year cycle

Self-assessment document

- England/N. Ireland: Institutional briefing paper. Visiting teams will use it to consider the extent to which institutional level approaches to quality enhancement make systematic use of management information.
- Scotland: Reflective analysis (RA). Universities use it to document their entire range of quality assurance and enhancement activities.
- Wales: Self-evaluation document (SED).

Student submissions

- England/N. Ireland: Student representatives expected to make a separate submission of their own alongside the institution's document
- Scotland: Students do not make a separate submission, but are involved at each stage of the institutional process of submitting RA.
- Wales: Students encouraged to make separate submission if they wish

Visits

- England/N. Ireland: In two parts: A 'briefing visit', lasting three days, followed by the formal audit visit, which usually lasts five days.
- Scotland: Usually last between five and seven days, in two parts
- Wales: Usually last between five and seven days, in two parts

Judgments

- England/N. Ireland: As well as a summary judgment about the soundness of the university's management of the quality of its courses and the academic standards of its awards, review team also makes a comment on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its courses and the academic standards of its awards.
- Scotland: Summary judgments are made about the soundness of the university's management of the quality of its courses and the academic standards of its awards.
- Wales: As well as a summary judgment about the soundness of the university's management of the quality of its courses and the academic standards of its awards, a comment is also made about the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information that an institution publishes.

Recommendations

- England/N. Ireland: The published report includes the audit team's recommendations for consideration by the institution, categorized in order of priority: 'essential', 'advisable' or 'desirable'.
- Scotland: These are contained in the body of the text.
- Wales: These are contained in the body of the text.

Follow-up

- England/N. Ireland: A paper-based exercise in which the QAA looks at developments since the audit. The institution is asked to comment on actions they have taken since the audit report and any other changes. Follow-up occurs at the three-year mid-cycle point.
- Scotland: One year after review, the university provides written update to QAA indicating action to be taken in the light of its report. This provides basis for discussion at the annual meeting each institution has with the Agency.
- Wales: The reviewed university submits a written progress report to the QAA in mid cycle, prior to a meeting between the institution and the Agency.

2) The academic infrastructure

QAA and the UK higher education sector have worked together to develop the academic infrastructure. This set of UK-wide agreed guidelines and reference points is key to setting and

maintaining quality and standards across UK higher education. It includes four components: (1) The Code of Practice; (2) The frameworks for higher education qualifications (FHEQ); (3) Subject benchmark statements; and (4) Programme specifications.

In a mass participation in higher education, students, parents and employers all need clear information about courses and qualifications. In 1997, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education addressed the concerns of employers who wanted to know what they could expect from graduates who were candidates for jobs, calling for 'greater explicitness and clarity about standards and the levels of achievement required for different awards'. Institutions also need to have a clear understanding of the criteria against which they will be judged in reviews. QAA helps to define clear and explicit standards, for public information and as nationally agreed reference points. QAA has worked with the higher education sector and other stakeholders on the following initiatives.

(1) The Code of Practice

The Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education has 10 sections and offers guidelines for universities and colleges on good practice in the management of academic standards and quality.

10 sections - (1) Postgraduate research programmes; (2) Collaborative provision; (3) Students with disabilities; (4) External examining; (5) Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters; (6) Assessment of students; (7) Programme approval, monitoring and review; (8) Career education, information and guidance; (9) Placement learning; and (10) Recruitment and admissions.

Each section of the Code of Practice has been prepared in consultation with the higher education sector and with the participation of key stakeholder groups. As such it represents a consensus of the providers and users of UK higher education. Each section indicates the key issues that an institution should consider the respective areas of activity. The precepts encapsulate the matters that an institution could reasonably be expected to address through its own quality assurance arrangements. The accompanying guidance/explanation suggests possible ways by which those expectations might be met and demonstrated.

Every institution, regardless of its size, subject base, physical environment, population mix, traditions etc, should find that the Code of Practice is of relevance to it. Institutions will not be asked about their adherence to the Code of Practice on a precept by precept basis. They will be expected to explain in their self-evaluation documents how they have addressed the intentions of the precepts, including any resulting changes to their practices.

(2) The frameworks for higher education qualifications (FHEQ)

These describe the levels of achievement and attributes represented by the main qualification titles, such as bachelor's degree with honours, or master's degree. There are two frameworks - one

for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and one for Scotland.

The FHEQ should enable higher education providers to communicate with employers; schools; parents; prospective students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs); and other stakeholders the achievements and attributes represented by the typical higher education qualification titles.

QAA auditors and reviewers use the FHEQ as a reference point when auditing or reviewing the establishment and management of academic standards by higher education providers. In particular, auditors and reviewers look at how institutions align the academic standards of their awards with the levels referred to in the FHEQ. They also ascertain whether institutions have means of ensuring that awards and qualifications are of an academic standard at least consistent with the standards referred to in the FHEQ.

The FHEQ has five levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. These are numbered 4-8. The levels of the FHEQ, with examples of typical qualifications at each level, are represented in the following table.

Increasingly, higher education institutions, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The frameworks for higher education qualifications throughout the UK are designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration and thus align with *The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FQ-EHEA). As such, the labels used to distinguish the different levels of the FQ-EHEA (short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) have also been incorporated into the FHEQ:

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ Level	Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle
Doctoral degrees (eg, PhD/Dphil, EdD)	8	Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Master's degrees (eg, Mphil, Mlitt)	7	Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Integrated master's degrees (eg, MEng, Mchem)		
Postgraduate diplomas		
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)		
Postgraduate certificates		
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg, BA/BSc Hons)	6	First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Bachelor's degrees		
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)		
Graduate diplomas		
Graduate certificates		
Foundation Degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc)	5	Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		
Higher National Diplomas (HND)		
Higher National Certificates (HNC)	4	
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)		

(3) Subject benchmark statements

Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject. Working closely with the sector, QAA has published subject benchmark statements for a range of disciplines to set out clearly the academic characteristics and standards of UK programmes. Some benchmark statements combine or make reference to professional standards required by external professional or regulatory bodies in the discipline.

Subject benchmark statements do not represent a national curriculum in a subject area. Rather they allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design, within an overall conceptual framework established by an academic subject community. They are intended to assist those involved in programme design, delivery and review. They may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a subject area.

QAA has made a commitment to the sector to initiate a review of existing subject benchmark statements no later than five years since they were originally published. New subject benchmark statements are developed through the Recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements (the Scheme) which seeks to ensure that criteria relating to subject sufficiency and distinction are met. The Scheme also ensures that the process of developing a new subject benchmark statement is representative of the views of the subject community.

(4) Programme specifications

Programme specifications are the sets of information that each institution provides about its programmes. Each specification clarifies what knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes a student will have developed on successfully completing a specific programme. It also provides details of teaching and learning methods, assessment and subsequent career opportunities, and sets out how the programme relates to the qualifications framework.

This information allows prospective students to make comparisons and informed choices about the programmes they wish to study, and provides useful guidance for recruiters of graduates.

3) Teaching quality information

The publication of information about quality and standards in individual higher education institution is one component in the quality assurance framework. It is to help potential students (and their parents and advisers) make choices about where to study. The information has been published on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website, now re-launched as Unistats.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) owns the Unistats website on behalf of all higher education funding councils in the UK. The information is provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the National Student Survey run by HEFCE. The information includes the following areas, which are updated annually:

HEFCE

- National Student Survey

HESA

- Student data - entry qualifications and UCAS points, continuation and achievement.
- Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data - destinations of leavers, job categories and job types.
- Context statistics - student domicile, age, level of study, gender, study mode.

LSC

- Student data - entry qualifications and achievements.
- Context Statistics - student domicile, age, level of study, gender, study mode.

Samples of available information

- (1) Results for a university - each subject's UCAS points achieved, percentage of employed with graduate job and percentage of students satisfied
- (2) Results for individual subject - the following six categories of information are provided:
 - (a) Number of UCAS points that first year students had achieved by the time they started their course, and their academic background
 - (b) Student numbers (registered students, male-female ratio, percentage of overseas students), study levels (full-time or part-time) and study modes (first-degree, postgraduate-level or other modes)
 - (c) Results of the National Student Survey - the percentage of students who responded either 'agree' or 'completely agree' to a question
 - (d) Degree results and progression
 - (e) Top profession types of students with a job, six months after graduation
 - (f) Detailed information on a university (student breakdown, QAA reports and contact details)

4) Student surveys

The National Student Survey is a national initiative, conducted annually since 2005. The survey runs across all publicly funded higher education institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and higher education institutions in Scotland participating. (In case of Scotland, the certain number of the institutions is chosen to take part.) Additionally, since 2008, further education colleges with directly funded higher education students in England have been eligible to participate.

The survey asks final year undergraduates and students in their final year of a course leading to undergraduate credits or qualifications to provide feedback on their courses in a nationally recognized format. There are 22 main questions about the following aspects of the student

learning experience, using closed multi-choice questions: 'Definitely agree', 'Mostly agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Mostly disagree', and 'Definitely disagree'.

Aspects and questions

- Teaching on his/her course
(ex. Staff are good at explaining things.)
- Assessment and feedback
(ex. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.)
- Academic support
(ex. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.)
- Organization and management
(ex. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.)
- Learning resources
(ex. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.)
- Personal development
(ex. The course has helped me to present myself with confidence.)
- Overall satisfaction
(ex. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.)

Students are also given the opportunity to write in positive and/or negative comments on their student learning experience as a whole at their university/college. If they provide comments at the end of the questionnaire, their comments may be passed on, anonymously, to their institution to help them identify how they can make improvements.

The results from the main 22 questions are made available for prospective students and their advisors on the Unistats website to help them make informed choices of what and where to study. The results are also made available to participating universities, colleges and students' unions to use to facilitate best practice and to enhance the student learning experience.

The survey has been commissioned by HEFCE on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL), the Training and Development Agency and Skills for Health. Ipsos MORI, an independent research agency, administers the survey. The survey is fully supported by the National Union of Students (NUS) and other student unions.

Source: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): An introduction to QAA, 2009

Universities UK, Quality and standards in UK universities: A guide to how the system works, 2008

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2008

The National Student Survey: www.thestudentsurvey.com/

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): Review of the Quality Assurance Framework, 2008

4. Other quality assurance initiatives

1) Research assessment

The Research Assessment Exercise is a peer review exercise to evaluate and provide ratings of the quality of research in UK higher education institutions, which has been conducted jointly by HEFCE, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), HEFCW, and DEL. The ratings are used to determine how research funding is allocated according to standards of international and national excellence, described through grades 5 star (highest) to 1 (lowest). Institutions conducting the best research receive a larger proportion of the grant.

HEFCE is working to develop new arrangements for the assessment and funding of research. The new arrangements, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), will build on the experience of the RAE.

The REF will consist of a single unified framework for the funding and assessment of research across all subjects. It will make greater use of quantitative indicators in the assessment of research quality than the RAE, while taking account of key differences between the different disciplines. Assessment will combine quantitative indicators, including bibliometric indicators wherever these are appropriate, and expert review. The economic and social impact of research, as well as impact upon public policy, will also contribute to the overall assessment of quality.

The REF will be fully implemented by 2014.

2) Accreditation by professional, regulatory and statutory bodies

Some programmes of study in higher education may lead also to a professional or vocational qualification, for example, in engineering, law, accountancy or medicine. Such programmes are subject to accreditation by the relevant professional, regulatory, or statutory body. This form of accreditation recognizes that a programme provides some, or all, of the competencies needed for professional practice.

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): Higher Education in the United Kingdom, 2005

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): A brief guide to quality assurance in UK higher education, 2003

5. History of quality assurance in UK higher education

Quality assurance before 1990

Prior to the early 1990s, university programmes and awards were not subject to any external monitoring or regulation other than the use of external examiners, and (as now) each institution was responsible for ensuring the quality and standards of its own programmes. However, higher education delivered by polytechnics and some higher education colleges was externally quality assured by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) worked with polytechnics, approving degree programmes and carrying out institutional reviews.

The Academic Audit Unit 1990-92

A series of efficiency studies initiated by the universities themselves in the late 1980s led to the establishment of an Academic Standards Group. In 1990 the universities themselves established the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) to take forward the recommendations of the Academic Standards Group. The AAU undertook peer-review academic audits of universities, scrutinising key areas where academic standards were set and monitored. Reports were published on a voluntary basis and contained no formal judgements or recommendations.

Quality assurance 1992-97: HEQC and the higher education funding councils

In 1992, the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act led to a number of fundamental changes in the way higher education in the UK was structured and funded. First, the Act abolished the binary system of polytechnics and universities and a sector-owned Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) was established, with the task of auditing all institutions' management of their internal quality assurance processes. Secondly, the three new UK funding councils were established by the Act and they set up their own quality assessment committees to manage the quality of the work that they funded. Subject-based inspection models, called 'teaching quality assessments' (later 'subject reviews'), were introduced by all the funding councils.

1997 to the present

External subject reviews were always controversial with higher education institutions which complained about cost, burden, and also the duplication of effort with the separate institutional audit procedure of HEQC.

In 1996 a Joint Planning Group was convened from the funding councils and the representative bodies of universities and colleges to try to design a unified quality assurance system that combined the two strands of audit and subject review. Although no feasible unified review method emerged, a single quality assurance agency was established in 1997 as QAA. This brought together the HEQC and the quality assessment functions of the funding councils.

The 1997 Dearing Report considerably expanded the duties of the new agency beyond the undertaking of assessments and audits to include the provision of public information on quality assurance; verification of standards; creation and maintenance of a higher education qualifications

framework; development of a code of practice; provision of benchmark standards; and the creation of a pool of external examiners. Although not all of these proposals were adopted, most were, and QAA's position as the UK's sole agency with responsibility for the assurance and enhancement of the quality and standards of higher education was consolidated.

Between 1997 and 2001 QAA continued operating both subject reviews and academic audits and developed most of the Dearing proposals, including the elements of the academic infrastructure and a new, UK-wide review process, to be called 'academic review'. This was to have comprised elements of both subject review and institutional audit and envisaged a gradual transition from the former to the latter.

In 2001, despite the fact that there had been general acceptance of the academic review proposal across the UK and QAA had already begun to use the process in Scotland, a number of English universities complained to the Government that this new approach did not meet their demands for a lighter burden of external quality assurance and would perpetuate the high costs and limited benefits that they perceived in the previous arrangements. As a result of these representations, the Government declared publicly that there would be a reduction in the volume of reviewing undertaken by QAA. No forewarning of this decision had been given to the Scottish or Welsh higher education authorities, however, and their response was to disengage from the UK-wide scheme and set up their own national review/audit arrangements: enhancement-led institutional review in Scotland; institutional review in Wales; and institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland. The English subject review cycle was completed in 2001 and then discontinued.

As part of the 2001 agreement between the key stakeholders about the future of external quality assurance in England, it was agreed that there should be a transitional period of three years, between 2002 and 2005, when all English higher education institutions should be audited using the new method.

Thereafter, the institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland begun in 2006 is operated on a six-yearly cycle. The institutional review in Wales begun in 2003 takes place on a six-year cycle, and the enhancement-led institutional review in Scotland begun in 2003 on a four-year cycle.

Source: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): Self-Evaluation, External Review for Confirmation of Full Membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2008

National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE), University Evaluation Forum, Presentation by Carolyn Campbell, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008

IV. The details of quality assurance organization: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

1. Overview of the organization

Year of establishment	1997
Location	Southgate House Southgate Street Gloucester GL1 UB
Representative	Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive
Number of staff	131
Statement of financial activities (for the year ended 31 July 2008) Unit: GBP	<p><u>Total income:</u> 10,016,040</p> <p>Main resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subscriptions from institutions: 3,687,350 • Contracts with HE funding bodies: 5,711,747 <p><u>Total expenses:</u> 9,975,826</p> <p>Main resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding standards: 5,718,309 • Supporting and enhancing quality: 2,079,494 • Offering expertise: 946,835 • Working worldwide: 629,361
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The QAA Board of Director - 15 members and two observers • Organizational structure - five groups. The four groups except the Chief Executive's Group are headed by a director. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Chief Executive's Group - corporate affairs and international affairs ▪ Reviews Group - all of the QAA's review and audit activities ▪ Development and Enhancement Group - primarily responsible for the management of the academic infrastructure for quality and standards ▪ QAA Scotland - all aspects of QAA's work in Scotland ▪ Administration Group - including function of communications and publications

Source: *The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): Self-Evaluation, External Review for Confirmation of Full Membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2008*

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): Annual review 2007-08

2. Mission and purposes

Mission

QAA's mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications, and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. QAA achieves this by reviewing standards and quality, and providing reference points that help to define clear and explicit standards.

Purposes

To achieve its mission, QAA works in partnership with the providers and funders of higher education, staff and students in higher education, employers and other stakeholders, to:

- safeguard the student and wider public interest in the maintenance of standards of academic awards and the quality of higher education
- communicate information on academic standards and quality to inform student choice and employers' understanding, and to underpin public policy-making
- enhance the assurance and management of standards and quality in higher education
- promote wider understanding of the nature of standards and quality in higher education, including the maintenance of common reference points, drawing on UK, other European and international practice.

Source: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): Self-Evaluation, External Review for Confirmation of Full Membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2008

3. The works of the organization

The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality rests with individual institutions. QAA reviews and reports on how well they meet those responsibilities, and encourages continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. QAA does this by:

- conducting external reviews of universities and colleges
- publishing reports on the confidence that can be placed in an institution's ability to maintain standards and quality
- offering expert guidance on maintaining and improving the quality of higher education
- advising the government on applications for degree awarding powers and university title.

1) External review

QAA undertakes regular, formal, external reviews. The review arrangements have been developed and evolved in each administrative part of the UK. (The overview and main differences between each arrangement are described on *III-3-1) Institutional audits and reviews*, page 23.)

As one of the major review schemes, the detail of the institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland is given below:

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. Institutional audit encourages institutions to be self-evaluative and is therefore a process that in itself offers opportunities for enhancement of institutional management of quality and standards, the process of self-reflection.

Institutional audit was originally carried out in 2002-03 to 2005-06 as part of transitional arrangements. The revised institutional audit process builds upon the original arrangement. Universities and colleges in England and Northern Ireland that subscribe to QAA take part in the revised process, which operate over six year. Thus, the cycle of the revised process has been extended from 2005-06 to 2010-11.

Scope of examination

The revised institutional audit examines:

- the effectiveness of an institution's internal quality assurance structures and mechanisms, in the light of the academic infrastructure and the *European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education*, and the way in which the quality of its educational provision and academic standards of its awards are regularly reviewed and resulting recommendations implemented. This provides information on an institution's soundness as a provider of HE qualifications of national and international standing
- the effectiveness of arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and enhancing the quality of postgraduate research programmes
- the effectiveness of an institution's approach to building systematically upon the outcomes of their internal quality assurance procedures, on the findings of reports of external reviews, and on other information and feedback from students, graduates and employers, in order to develop and implement institutional approaches to enhancing the quality of provision
- the accuracy and completeness of the information that an institution publishes about the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision, including the teaching quality information (TQI), which is published on Unistats.

Audit team

Originally, the basic institutional audit team normally comprised four auditors and an audit secretary. With the revision of the Handbook for Institutional Audit in September 2009, the basic audit team will normally include five auditors, one of whom will be a student, and an audit secretary.

Student auditors will be expected to be current students (undergraduate or graduate), sabbatical student representatives or recent (within two years) graduates. Audit secretaries will be normally recruited from among senior administrative staff in institutions. And, each audit is coordinated by a QAA Assistant Director.

Audit process: Institutional briefing paper

Institutional audit is based on the expectation that a reflective institution will appraise the effectiveness of its management of standards and quality using questions of the type:

- what are we trying to do?
- why are we doing it?
- how are we doing it?
- why is that the best way to do it?
- how do we know it works?
- how can we improve it?

Institutional briefing paper is the paper which the institution prepares for institutional audit and there is an opportunity for them to describe how it goes about answering these six basic questions. QAA normally receives this paper from the institution about 10 weeks before the audit visits.

Students' written submissions

Students are invited to prepare a written submission to brief the audit team. It was clear that students welcomed the opportunity to provide their considered view to the audit team in writing, and the audit process derived great benefit from the constructive and thoughtful written submissions made by students. The following four particular questions proved to be useful stimuli for eliciting students' views in a way that is particularly helpful to an audit team.

- How accurate is the information that the institution publishes?
- Do students know what is expected of them?
- What is the student experience as a learner like?
- Do students have a voice in the institution, and is it listened to?

Meetings and visits

The audit process will begin with a preliminary meeting between the institution and a QAA Assistant Director to discuss the structure and content of the audit as a whole. Also, guidance on the institution's briefing paper and the students' written submission will be provided. This meeting will be arranged about 24 weeks before the audit visit.

An audit team's visit to an institution will take place in two parts. The first part is the briefing visit, and the second is the audit visit.

During the briefing visit, the audit team will explore and gain further clarification of matters outlined in the briefing papers submitted by the institution and by the students, and will consider some of the evidence offered by documents cited as references in the institution's briefing paper. Audit team also identifies broad lines of enquiry for the audit visit. This briefing visit will be held five weeks before the audit visit.

The audit visit provides an opportunity for the team to pursue in greater depth the lines of enquiry that it identified at the briefing visit; to extend its study of the institution's documentation relating to the management of quality and standards; to meet particular groups of staff and students; and generally to explore the focuses of audit including institutional management of academic standards, learning opportunities, and quality enhancement.

The audit team will ensure that its programme for the audit visit includes meetings with students

so that it can gain first-hand information on students' experience as learners and on their engagement with the institution's approach to quality assurance and enhancement. It will seek opportunities to meet student representatives during the audit visit in order to discuss with them, in the context of the views expressed in any written submission, the information that it has been gathering during the visits.

The audit visit will normally extend over five working days, of which up to four days will involve meetings between the audit team and staff and students of the institution and, if relevant, its collaborative partners. On the final day of the audit visit, the audit team considers its findings in order to make preliminary decisions and agreements on the level of confidence, the commentaries for the institutions' approaches to quality enhancement, features of good practices, and recommendation for actions.

Audit trails

Audit teams use 'trailing' as a technique for gathering evidence in an organized way from documents produced by the institution, previous audit reports produced by QAA and other information that is in the public domain, about institutional process and procedures, and their impact. Trails are used to examine particular institutional approaches, policies or procedures in order to test their effectiveness. The findings of the trails will be incorporated into the audit report and is annexed, as contributions to the evidence on which the audit team has drawn on for its analysis, findings, judgments and commentaries.

Judgments

The audit team makes a summative judgement of 'confidence', 'limited confidence', or 'no confidence', that can reasonably be placed in: the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards; and the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Reports

Audit reports are public documents. They are all structured in the same way that the summary section of the report provides the judgments, recommendations, features of good practice, and commentaries. The recommendations are for further consideration by the institution, and will be categorized in order of priority as 'essential', 'advisable' and 'desirable'. The report will have a technical annex to carry the detail and explanatory material that is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

Mid-cycle follow up

The mid-cycle follow up will serve as a short health check, for the institution and for QAA, on the institution's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision, normally some three years after an institutional audit. It will be an opportunity to reflect upon developments made in the management of standards and quality within the institution since the previous

institutional audit, and, in the context of the findings of that audit, for QAA to advise the institution of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest to the team that conducts the institution's next audit.

The Handbook for Institutional Audit updated in 2009

The Handbook was first published in 2006 and was revised in September 2009 after consultation with the sector regarding:

- the inclusion of student members on audit teams (See page 35 for more detail.)
- the introduction of an approach to the audit of collaborative provision which includes, as appropriate, within-audit, hybrid audit, or separate collaborative audit activity. Where QAA considers that it is not practicable to consider collaborative provision as part of the Institutional audit, it will be audited through either a hybrid Institutional audit (hybrid model) or a separate audit of collaborative provision (separate model).

Differences of the hybrid and separate models from Institutional audit

In case of a hybrid model audit, there will be one preliminary meeting which takes place approximately 36 weeks before the audit visit. The hybrid model includes visits up to three partner links. In case of a separate model, there will have been an Institutional audit some time in the current audit cycle - normally about 18 months to two years previously. The separate model includes up to six partner links. This model focuses only on how an awarding institution discharges its responsibilities for what is done in its name, and under its authority, through a collaborative arrangement with a partner organisation.

2) The academic infrastructure

QAA and the UK higher education sector have worked together to develop the academic infrastructure. It consists of four components - the Code of Practice, the frameworks for higher education qualifications (FHEQ), the subject benchmark statements, and the programme specifications. (For more information, please see *III-3-2 The academic infrastructure*, page 24.)

3) Other works

(1) Access to HE

The Access to HE Diploma enables adults without other qualifications such as A levels to progress to higher education. Regulated by QAA, the qualification is widely recognized by UK universities and colleges. There are over 1,500 different courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma. Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) validate and review these courses, and award the Access to HE qualification to successful students. QAA licenses and monitors the work of the AVAs, and publishes information about Access to HE.

(2) Advising government

QAA advises government on the merits of applications for degree awarding powers and university title, but are not responsible for awarding them. The power to award degrees is regulated by law. It is an offence for an institution to purport to award, or to offer to award a UK degree, unless it is authorised so to do. An Act of Parliament in 1992 provided for such powers to be granted by the Privy Council, which acts on the advice of government.

The scrutiny of degree awarding powers and university title applications is one of QAA's most important responsibilities since, in making these recommendations, in each case it is helping to redefine the UK's higher education sector. Applications for taught and research degree awarding powers or university title must be made to the Privy Council which then forwards the submission to the relevant territorial Minister with higher education responsibilities. Applications are then sent to QAA for advice. Its remit is to offer confidential guidance on the application, through the appropriate Minister, to the Privy Council.

(3) Supporting developments in higher education

QAA helps institutions enhance their management of quality and standards by publishing and sharing the intelligence and guidance gained from the full range of its work. Audit and review reports are analysed to identify themes of good practice and difficulties commonly encountered, with findings published to stimulate discussion and debate and promote improvement.

Publications in the Sharing good practice series include *Outcomes from Institutional audit* and *Learning from various review methods*. *Quality matters* is a series of occasional briefing papers from QAA.

In Scotland, as part of the Quality Enhancement Framework, Enhancement Themes are planned and developed in partnership with the higher education sector. These Enhancement Themes encourage the identification and sharing of good practice delivered locally and worldwide, generating ideas and examples of practice with the aim of enhancing the student experience.

(4) International work

QAA takes a leading role in international developments in standards and quality, enjoying a close relationship with quality assurance agencies around the world. It works with a wide range of government and other bodies across the UK to inform and support the higher education sector in the light of international developments. Overseas audit activity helps to improve confidence in the work of UK universities and colleges operating internationally.

QAA is fully confirmed as a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), established as part of the Bologna Process to encourage and develop the exchange of information on quality assurance throughout Europe. QAA was first independently reviewed in April 2008 for ENQA membership purposes. The report stated that it was 'consistently impressed by the calibre and professionalism of all those contributing to the work of QAA in

maintaining quality and standards across HE in the UK’.

Source: *The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA): Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006*

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