Characteristics Statement
International Pathway Courses

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About this Statement

How can I use this document?

Characteristics Statements are used by higher education providers in the design and development of new courses and as a reference point when reviewing or revalidating existing courses. They provide general guidance for the distinctive features and structure of types of courses and qualifications, allowing for flexibility and innovation in design within a framework agreed by the subject community. Because the Statement describes outcomes and attributes of International Pathway Courses in a UK-wide context, many higher education providers will use them as an enhancement tool for course design and approval, and for subsequent monitoring and review.

Characteristic Statements are produced by QAA on behalf of their Members. A summary of the Statement is available on the QAA website for employers, prospective students and higher education providers who are not QAA Members.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Statement can be found in QAA’s Glossary.

Relationship to legislation

The responsibility for academic standards lies with the higher education provider who awards the degree. Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them by their relevant funding and regulatory bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements.

Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Characteristics Statement where appropriate. Individual higher education providers will decide how they use this information.

Additional sector reference points

Higher education providers are likely to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by PSRBs and industry or employer expectations. QAA has also published Advice and Guidance to support the Quality Code for Higher Education which will be helpful when using this Statement - for example, in course design, learning and teaching, external expertise and monitoring and evaluation.
1  Context and purposes of International Pathway Courses

1.1  Context

International Pathway Courses (IPCs) is a term that describes a range of courses primarily intended to give international students an opportunity to gain entry to UK degree courses. They are aimed at students who did not reach the required English and academic entry requirements for their chosen degree courses. They should provide an opportunity to develop core skills and confidence in a safe and supportive environment.

This statement includes, but is not restricted to, the courses titles listed below. Reference is also made to the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

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<tr>
<th>Course type</th>
<th>England/Wales RQF/CQFW</th>
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<td>Pre-Master's/Master's Foundation/International Graduate Diploma</td>
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For simplicity, this document will refer to course levels using the RQF/CQFW used in England and Wales first, followed by Scottish equivalents using the SCQF. For example, Level 3/6 will refer to a course at Level 3 on the RQF and Level 6 on the SCQF.

The original IPCs were Level 3/6 International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) designed to allow access to UK higher education for students coming from countries with a 12+4 model instead of the 13+3 model favoured in most of the UK. Before the creation of IFPs, students without access to A levels or International Baccalaureates (IB) were unable to study for degrees in the UK. This is especially impactful for students where compulsory secondary education finishes with the opportunity to take exams equivalent to GCSE or Level 2/5.

IPCs now provide entry at multiple levels to both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. They offer an opportunity for international students from various nationalities and cultures seeking to develop skills and qualify for entry to undergraduate or postgraduate degree courses. Although these courses are commonly delivered at differing academic levels, in line with their bridging function at different stages, they have a shared philosophy and objective: to prepare international students for successful engagement with, and smooth transition into, UK undergraduate or postgraduate study. Fundamentally, IPCs should offer a contextualised understanding of an education system that may differ from the student's own. The purpose is not to replace students' original approach to academic study, but rather to enhance their intellectual and cultural transition to study at a UK university.

IPCs can be delivered within a range of different provider contexts in the higher education sector, which include the following:

- universities or higher education institutions in the UK
- transnational branches of UK universities overseas
- private providers in the UK and overseas
- joint ventures between universities and private or public colleges.
Providers who offer IPCs typically deliver an approach to education and curriculum development designed to accommodate the needs of students from a wide range of different cultural and educational backgrounds. A key element of such courses is developing transferable academic skills, English for Academic Purposes and subject knowledge at levels ranging from 3/6 to 6 (9/10 on the SCQF) or equivalent. Common features are the development of students' understanding of UK higher education culture, a representative range of assessment methods and good academic practice.

Typically, subject modules are taught by subject experts with close collaboration between language specialists and subject specialists. Ideally, courses should be tailored to fit the skills and knowledge requirements of the degree or field students are progressing onto with tailored elements for the specific institution to which the students wish to progress.

1.2 Purposes of International Pathway Courses

In summary, the purposes of IPCs are to:

- provide an entry route onto undergraduate or postgraduate degree programmes for international students who do not possess qualifications that are eligible for direct entry to these programmes
- support international student recruitment for the providing institution or its partner higher education institution
- equip students with the relevant academic knowledge, skills and language abilities to study specific degree courses offered at undergraduate or postgraduate levels
- provide pastoral support and educational guidance to assist students in making the transition from their previous studies and academic culture into undergraduate or postgraduate higher education in the UK
- foster a positive approach to the acquisition of knowledge and skills to promote lifelong learning.

International Foundation Programmes (IFPs)

IFPs are courses typically used by international students who require a higher level of subject specialism at Level 3/6 for admission to UK undergraduate higher education than that provided by their home country's compulsory secondary education system. In some cases, IFPs can also offer the opportunity to compensate for a lower level of attainment during previous study at Level 3/6.

The standalone IFP at 120 credits (CATS, 60 ECTS) is not usually considered a terminal award in the UK, although as it is positioned at Level 3/6, it can be considered to be a qualification equivalent to the completion of Year 13 in the UK secondary education system. Students studying an IFP usually work towards a particular target degree at a known higher education provider. However, as a qualification, the IFP is also highly transferable as it can be used to apply for entry to other UK providers beyond the institution with which it is originally associated.

Some international students choose to take an IFP before studying at Level 4/7 in the UK even if they already have the required level of attainment and specialism at Level 3/6. In this way, IFPs help international students acculturate to UK higher education and develop different or new academic and language skills before embarking on a full undergraduate degree.
International Year One

International Year One courses, at Level 4/7, are used by international students as a pathway to Level 5 of an undergraduate degree. Students will typically study subject, language and skills modules, most of which will be at Level 4/7. Although this pathway is positioned at a higher level than an IFP, International Year One Courses function similarly to IFPs in the academic preparation and the opportunity for acculturation to UK higher education. Entry requirements for International Year One often require successful completion of compulsory education in the student's home country plus further study of up to one additional year.

Pre-Master's/Master's Foundation/International Graduate Diploma

Students use pre-master's courses at Levels 5/8 or 6/10 to qualify and prepare for admission to a UK master's degree at Level 7/11. Some providers offer pre-master's courses at Level 5/8 to enable students to come to the UK at a lower level of English than that required for a visa at Level 6/10 (English B1, rather than B2). Such students will already possess qualifications at Level 6/10 and need additional time and support to enhance their international learning in the context of preparing for their master's degree. Like undergraduate equivalent courses, pre-master's courses are also used to improve students' subject knowledge, study skills and academic language abilities.

1.3 Characteristics of International Pathway Courses

IPCs are typically delivered by universities, private providers or partner colleges in partnership with a university. Teaching is normally provided by:

- subject lecturers or tutors from within the schools of a university
- subject lecturers or tutors directly employed by the pathways department within a university, or by the private provider or partner college
- a mix of the above two options.

Typically, the modules and curriculum of IPCs include three core components:

(i) English for Academic Purposes
(ii) academic skills
(iii) subject modules in different groupings related to the requirements of different intended degree courses.

English for Academic Purposes

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) modules typically focus on training in all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). Modules of this type aim to ensure that students who complete an International Pathway Course have an appropriate level of proficiency in the use of academic language for entry to their intended degree course. The result of this would generally be an exit level equivalent to at least CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) B2 in each of the four skills, and sometimes higher than this to align with individual university English language entry requirements for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.
**Academic skills**

Academic skills provision typically focuses on academic integrity and learning how to search for, evaluate, credit and synthesise sources within students' academic work. In addition, a key component of IPCs is ensuring that students learn how to become independent learners and develop appropriate studentship. Such study skills include critical thinking, an understanding of academic integrity, and the development of confidence to engage in class with tutors and the broader support services available.

**Subject modules**

Academic content provision is typically relevant to the student's intended degree course, although students may also choose optional subjects in different areas of study. Educational content will generally be delivered at or immediately below the level that students will experience in their first year of undergraduate or postgraduate study in the case of pre-master's, this may range from Level 3/5 to 5/8 for undergraduate pathways or Level 5/8 or 6/10 for pathway courses designed to prepare students for postgraduate study. Content may sometimes include some undergraduate or postgraduate modules that form part of the target degree course level. In other cases, modules may be delivered exclusively to international pathway students.

While the structure of these courses and the balance of EAP, academic skills and subject modules may vary, IPCs should not be predominantly language courses with subject-focus as a vehicle for learning English. Instead, they should be subject courses with language as a vehicle for studying academic content.

**Student experience**

The student experience is a vital part of IPCs. Developing a relationship with the university where the intended degree will be delivered is crucial in meeting student expectations and supporting academic progression to a degree course. Academic acculturation can be achieved in various ways - through students being based on the same campus for their pathway course as for their future degree or through close interaction and visits during the pathway course, before the transition to the location of degree study.

**Delivery models**

Providers of IPCs use a range of different delivery models to provide the courses that are offered, which includes the following:

- **Delivery by a higher education institution (HEI)**
  - Modules and support provided by an HEI's IPCs' department in the UK or on the HEI's transnational campus
  - Modules and support provided by the HEI's academic departments related to the different subject focus
  - A sharing of responsibility in module and support provision between an HEI's IPCs' department and the HEI's academic departments.

- **Collaborative delivery by an HEI and one or more partner colleges**
  - Quality assurance and principal progression route provided by the HEI in the UK
  - Modules, student support and alternative progression routes offered by the partner college either off-site on private premises or in an embedded college on the HEI's campus.
International Foundation Programmes (IFPs)

These can be provided as one-year access courses at Level 3/6 for 120 credits (CATS) or integrated into degree courses as the first element of a bachelor's with honours course, typically incorporating 480 credits (CATS) over four years. The final qualification is not usually considered a terminal award if the course is taken as a one-year, stand-alone option. However, it can usually be used to apply for entry to most UK higher education providers. Students studying for an IFP usually work towards a particular target degree.

Often IFPs offer a range of cross-curricular subject modules designed to prepare students for degrees at the host or target higher education institution in the following year. The required set of subject modules is often determined by the course directors of the intended future degree course. There is sometimes also the option for one or more elective modules.
2 Distinctive features of International Pathway Courses

2.1 Design

Students who need to take IPCs come from a wide range of culturally different educational backgrounds. Therefore, possibly more than in other programmes, course design needs to consider the diversity of the student cohort.

IPCs typically aim to prepare students for all aspects of student life on undergraduate or postgraduate degree courses. To do this they will seek to involve students with representative elements of the formal curriculum through modules, lectures, seminars, practical or lab sessions and assessments. In addition, students are encouraged to engage with the informal curriculum and co-curricular activities through events and university societies.

IPCs also provide international students with the opportunity to explore a variety of subject modules which they may not have previously studied in this depth or at the same level. As a result, IPCs should offer additional exploration of subject areas, degree variations, and degree pathways. Notably, IPCs allow students at different levels of ability to develop their confidence for higher-level study while benefiting from specially tailored academic and pastoral support.

2.2 Structure

IPCs are usually designed to last for one academic year which consists of 30 weeks x 40 hours of student effort, totalling 1200 hours. This mirrors the common structure of 120 credits offered in a year of a degree courses. Different organisations have multiple start and finish dates.

Modules are often designed in consultation with degree-providing departments and host institutions to ensure that students are ready for degree-level study at the end of the course. IFPs may be one-year, standalone or integrated into a four-year course at undergraduate level. The design of the course follows the given university credit system. Typically, that involves a combination of modules ranging from 10 to 30 credits (CATS) studied full time over one academic year with students needing 120 credits (CATS) to progress.

IPCs tend to use the qualifications of specific countries as the starting point for the development of the curriculum. The intended learning outcomes required to commence a degree course then determine the design of course modules.

IPCs are designed differently according to the specific levels of access which they need to provide. For example, Level 3/6 courses are often designed in a more linear and developmental manner - first scaffolding students in their learning and moving towards a greater level of independence to gradually managing the transition from high school towards the challenge of Level 4/7 and the subsequent stages of an undergraduate degree. Higher-level IPCs seek to closely replicate the experience of studying for a degree at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This approach allows students to have as authentic an experience as possible, retaining opportunities to build confidence and independence while adjusting to the UK higher education environment. Since the global pandemic, the number of institutions offering online and distance learning IPCs has rapidly increased, and this may continue to grow in prevalence in the future.
Generally, IPCs have at least 15 contact hours per week as required by UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) for visa regulatory purposes. Indeed, many IPCs have significantly more hours per teaching week.

Standard design features include the:

- **duration of the course:**
  - over a standard academic year from September to June
  - from January or February until August
  - from April until August, including a higher number of hours of tuition per week of study; this is sometimes referred to as an accelerated pathway
- **combination of elective and core modules allowing students to access specialist degrees while having an element of free choice**
- **opportunity for major/minor study options**
- **positioning of language and skills study components as compulsory or optional**
- **availability of alternative pathways for students with higher or lower entry levels of English language and academic skill proficiency, allowing higher or lower intensive emphasis on language study**
- **focus on study for the specific purposes of the intended target degree**
- **level of collaboration with the intended degree providing department/school.**

### 2.3 Employer involvement

As IPCs focus on developing skills and knowledge required for higher levels of study in the UK, the intended learning outcomes of international pathway modules tend to be aligned to the specific study requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate study rather than to employability outcomes. In this context, the extrinsic motivation of students studying IPCs is most likely to be driven by the aim of gaining admission to higher levels of study rather than by employability.

Nevertheless, where the institution integrates graduate attributes into its module specifications, these can sometimes help students on IPCs to connect with opportunities to develop employability skills in more explicit ways at this level. In addition, as business pathways are common at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the teaching of modules associated with this discipline are more likely to embed opportunities for contributions from employers directly. Where students have access to broader student services, the option should also exist for counselling from Careers and Employability Services at the host HEI.

### 2.4 Accessibility

The existence of IPCs improves accessibility to undergraduate degree courses for international students. International Pathway Courses usually recognise qualifications from across the globe. This process involves interpreting worldwide qualifications via [Ecctis](http://www.ecctis.org) (formerly UK NARIC) or Admissions Offices, identifying academic skills, language proficiency, and subject-level bridging requirements to allow for future study at undergraduate or postgraduate levels.

IPC also offer tuition in English for Academic Purposes to support students who have previously studied in other languages or need more training in scholarly communication for UK university purposes.
While traditional IPCs had only one entry point, more recently additional entry points of January/February, and sometimes April, have been added. This variety of entry points allows up to three intakes within one academic year, which can be helpful for students who are not ready to commence their studies in October, but who do not wish to wait a year for the next opportunity.

One reason for this is that some students come from countries where high school finishes in November, meaning that they would have to wait up to 10 months to begin a September Foundation. As a result, January/February and April entry foundations have had to be redesigned to allow for more intensive study over a shorter period. September, January/February and April intakes all allow for entry to undergraduate study at the start of the following academic year.

Courses often offer a wide range of access pathways for the study of different intended degrees. For example, some IPCs are available in remote study or blended learning modes. In addition, certain universities offer transnational iterations of their IPCs, delivered at overseas campuses. Additionally, providers of IPCs and networks of higher education institution-led pathways courses often provide opportunities to access degree-level study at a wider network of providers after completion of pathway study.

Visits by international pathway academic staff to targeted countries alongside pre-departure briefings, induction courses and websites, and buddy systems all assist students in understanding and accessing these courses.

2.5 Progression

Students enrolled on IPCs are often guaranteed progression onto a particular degree course at a specific university, provided they achieve a minimum threshold of performance on a course across particular modules. In some cases, additional progression requirements may also exist (for example, achieving a threshold score on the UCAT test for entry onto medicine degrees).

Required progression grades may exceed typical passing grades needed by undergraduate students to progress internally from level to level of a degree course. This is to align with the normal expectations of direct entry tariff grades required to join a degree, which are likely to exceed the requirement to simply pass. For example, students may be required to achieve a score of 60% on a particular module to progress, compared to 40% to pass an undergraduate module within a degree. Therefore, it is good practice for providers to make progression requirements explicit to students before starting their studies on IPCs.

Higher education institutions may choose to recognise IPCs other than those they deliver or that are delivered in partnership with the institution as acceptable entry qualifications on a case-by-case basis.

Progression grades may be adjusted annually by International Pathway Course providers and Admissions Tutors in the receiving HEI faculty/school. Sometimes students do not need to apply through UCAS to progress from the pathway course to the degree, and in other contexts, it is a requirement. For example, degrees that contain an integrated international pathway component will not require an additional UCAS application after the first entry point.

Students who are not eligible to progress to their intended HEI are usually supported in applying to and joining other institutions for their future degree study.
2.6 Flexibility

The course structure often allows for some choice in academic content studied, although restrictions may be placed on subjects that can be taken based on a student's intended degree course. Students choose their modules of study according to their intended degree course and most are required to study English for Academic Purposes.

IPCs are usually designed to provide a progression route onto a particular degree course, or group of degree courses, at a specific university. However, students may also present these courses as potential entry qualifications to any HEI, depending on the discretion of the individual institution. It is good practice for providers to make course structure, entry qualifications, and expected achievement levels explicit to enable this flexibility.

IPCs can be standalone or integrated, which can impact application to study, and subsequent progression in certain ways. For example, students who need to comply with immigration requirements for study purposes can use a single visa for integrated courses. Standalone courses typically require a second visa application for the intended degree course after the IPC. This approach commonly allows students to apply using a broader range of English language assessments. Moreover, the standalone model provides greater flexibility in terms of progression, while the integrated format sometimes 'ties' students into a specific discipline (although there may be room for progression flexibility). If students join an integrated course, also it is common for them to study alongside a broader mix of international and home students. Both versions have advantages and disadvantages.

2.7 Partnership

To address student access and teaching capacity issues, over 60 higher education institutions across the UK, including seven in Scotland, have established partnerships with private providers. The partnership can include recruitment of students and/or delivery of academic courses. Partnership models can include approaches such as joint ventures with private providers, embedded private colleges on the HEI campus, and arrangements with private or publicly funded off-site colleges. The model selected has critical implications for UKVI compliance and the responsibility for student sponsorship and visa issuance.

IPCs can also be offered at partner institutions overseas (franchises or branch campuses). These partnerships allow for the expansion of higher education provision in a given country, making foreign degree study accessible to a broader range of students while also strengthening the international position of the home institution.

2.8 Monitoring and review

Courses delivered by higher education institutions and private providers usually use monitoring and review processes that resemble those employed for university degree-level provision. Such processes might typically include:

- periodic institutional reviews/audits
- external review conducted by QAA
- regular Boards of Study and course committee meetings
- external examiners and/or advisers to monitor and oversee assessment (and sometimes teaching)
- a system of internal moderation of assessments and annual monitoring reports
- a policy on peer observation of teaching
- student voice or student-staff liaison committees and module evaluation questionnaires to collect and review student feedback
- monitoring onward student performance and degree outcomes.
3 Content, structure and delivery of International Pathway Courses

3.1 Content and structure

IPCs are often structured into pathways consisting of a series of modules. Clusters of modules usually give access to degrees in different subject areas. This approach could include pathways in business, science, social sciences, and arts and humanities. Depending on the subject area and the institutions involved, there may be different pathways and specific routes to particular degrees.

Each pathway will typically have its own set of modules alongside some compulsory modules for all students regardless of their route. These are often the Academic Skills and EAP modules. Modules to be taught are usually chosen in consultation with receiving departments while considering students' target areas of study and preferences, where options or electives are possible.

Modules are designed and set at the pathway level, immediately below the target level of progression. However, some pathways might include a combination of module levels with some from the target degree level. For example, some HEIs provide subject modules delivered by the institution's academic schools, while others convene and deliver the subjects within a pathways department or centre specific to pathways study.

3.2 Teaching and learning

IPCs employ various learning and teaching approaches to support the gradual development of students' subject knowledge, transferable skills and language skills.

Approaches that typically underpin learning and teaching on IPCs sometimes include Task-Based Instruction (TBI), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

The academic content of modules is typically relevant to the student's intended degree course, although students may also choose optional subjects in different areas to study. Educational content will generally be delivered at or immediately below the level that students will experience in their first year of undergraduate study. This would typically be at Level 3/6 or 4/7, depending on the nature and positioning of the course. Content may sometimes consist of undergraduate modules that form part of the target degree course, while in other cases, modules may be delivered exclusively to pathways students.

IPCs are delivered by lecturers or tutors holding positions within the institution or by sessional lecturers. Students are usually taught in a degree style; however, lecture groups are often smaller than those for degrees. EAP or Academic Skills classes are generally conducted in groups of students smaller than 20.

Like degree courses, pathway course modules are delivered in several ways using different types of session, including:

- lectures
- seminars
- tutorials
- workshops
- practical sessions
laboratory work
presentations
synchronous and asynchronous technology-enhanced activities
independent and group tasks
use of virtual learning environments.

It may be the case that students' previous learning experience has been more didactic than customary in the UK. Consequently, IPCs tend to focus on developing students' independent learning skills within the confines of their academic disciplines.

During IPCs, students are also encouraged to develop transferable academic skills relevant to the UK's higher education system. These skills include time management, independent learning, developing an understanding of academic integrity, reading and note-taking, research, critical thinking, teamworking and reflective skills.

### 3.3 Assessment

The assessment of IPCs typically involves a combination of coursework and exams. Some courses require examinations to be held within the institution's examination period and under exam conditions. Others are entirely coursework based.

Assessment on IPCs can be seen to have two key objectives which support assessment for learning. One is to offer a student-centred approach to assessment that focuses on skills and knowledge gained. The second is to ensure that students are exposed to the types of assessment they will encounter on their follow-on degree programmes.

The assessment strategy for IPCs is usually designed to align with learning challenges associated with either the start of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree at the intended higher education institution, with academic regulations following standard institutional practice. This approach usually includes penalties for plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Formative and summative assessments are generally used. Unsuccessful students can also typically resit.

Assessments patterns for modules usually mirror the range of assessment methodologies that students would experience at university, so this includes:

- essays
- projects
- reports
- unseen examinations
- oral presentations.

A common feature of assessment in IPCs is the focus on process and product work, whereby students are given formative verbal and written feedback on their work before being awarded a summative mark. Peer feedback opportunities are sometimes given to raise students' awareness of how to improve their work. Students are also encouraged to reflect on how they engaged with feedback before completing a final draft.

As with many degree courses at UK universities, students are often required to submit written assessed work online through Turnitin, which is used to help raise student awareness of appropriate strategies to avoid plagiarism and poor academic practice.
For courses at Level 3/6, students may not automatically receive an award on successful completion of the course. Instead, a transcript is issued to each student showing the percentage marks and grades awarded for each unit. Courses set at higher levels are principally designed to facilitate progression. However, if a student is unable to or decides not to progress to their intended institution then an appropriate exit award may be made – for example, Foundation Certificate or Certificate of Higher Education.
4 Membership of the Advisory Group

BPP University
Cambridge Education Group
Cardiff University
Leeds University
Oxford Brookes University
University of Bath
University of Dundee
University of Hertfordshire
University of Kent
University of Reading
Dr Eoin Jordan, Director, International Education Institute, University of St Andrews
University of Westminster