Characteristics Statements
An Introduction



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Characteristics Statements context

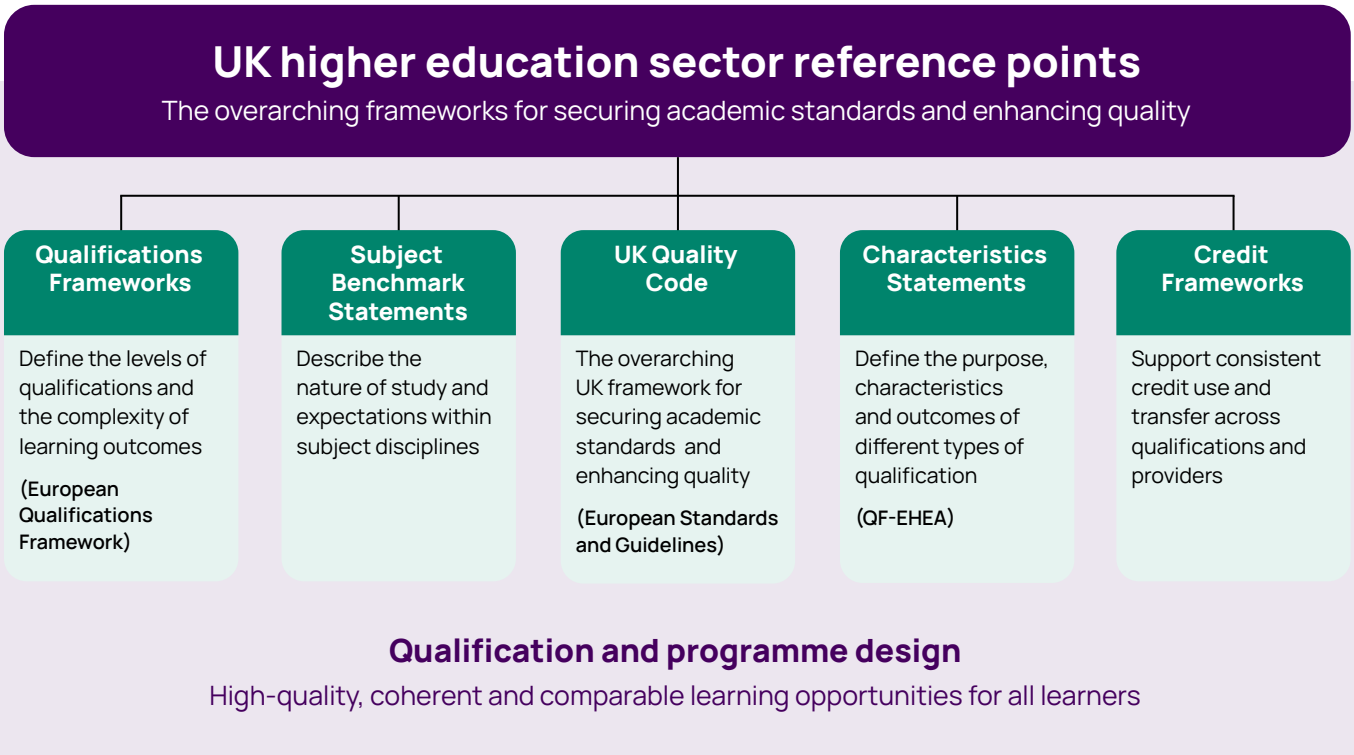
QAA Characteristics Statements are one element of a suite of sector reference points, each designed to build and maintain the integrity, consistency, and quality of academic awards within UK higher education. They are developed by QAA in partnership with higher education providers in the UK tertiary sector.

Characteristics Statements complement the UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2024, QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, and The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (2024).

There are two parallel frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies. The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS) applies to Scotland and The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) operates in the rest of the UK. The FQHEIS is fully integrated into the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF). Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are required to adhere to the full framework that applies to their nation. In England, parts of the FHEQ have been adopted as sector-recognised standards. These form part of the regulatory requirements that providers registered with the Office for Students (OfS) must adhere to in England through compliance with ongoing condition of registration B5.

Each framework contributes to the UK's comprehensive, robust and credible national quality assurance system. The relationship between these reference points, and their alignment to corresponding European quality assurance reference points, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Sector reference points for UK HE

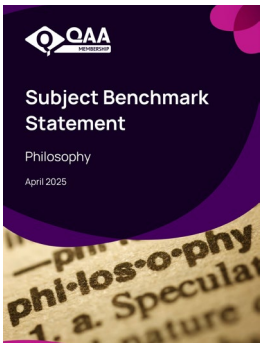


Sector reference points overview



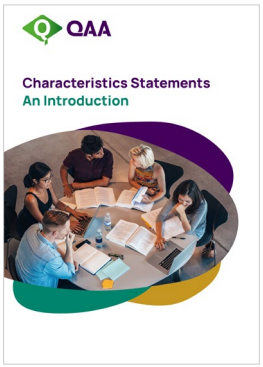
UK Quality Code for Higher Education

- Articulates sector-agreed principles of UK higher education, for securing academic standards and assuring and enhancing quality.
- Identifies the quality processes that support enhancement beyond any regulatory or national baseline.
- Provides a basis for UK providers to demonstrate that they meet European Standards and Guidelines for internal and external quality assurance.
- Describes the elements of a high-quality student learning experience, enabling students to succeed in their studies.



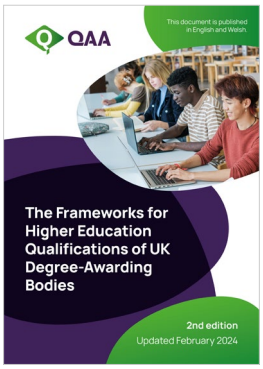
Subject Benchmark Statements

- Describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in specific subject areas.
- Show what graduates might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their studies.
- Support awarding bodies to align their qualifications to sectorally agreed expectations to ensure national and international equivalency.



Characteristics Statements

- Describe the distinctive features of qualification types normally awarded at one or more levels of the FHEQ/SCQF.
- Define the purpose, characteristics and outcomes of these different qualification types.
- Support awarding bodies to align their qualifications to sectorally agreed expectations to ensure national and international equivalency.



Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies

- Defines levels of complexity and challenge at which different qualifications sit.
- Describes how different qualifications relate to and may may lead to one another.
- Identifies the detail necessary for the description and marketing of qualifications to be accurate and consistent.

Characteristics Statements across the UK

The sector reference points operate differently across the UK devolved nations.

In **England** they do not form part of the Office for Students conditions of registration. Acting as a complementary, non-regulatory framework, Characteristics Statements support providers to manage and enhance the quality and standards of their academic provision in line with European expectations.

In **Wales** and **Scotland**, the sector reference points are an embedded element of the regulatory frameworks for higher education. In **Scotland**, the Scottish Funding Council's quality guidance states that Institutional Led Quality Reviews (ILQR) should explore the use of Characteristics Statements in setting and maintaining academic standards.

In **Wales**, Characteristics Statements are included as part of the baseline requirements in the Quality Assessment Framework (QAF) for Wales. In **Northern Ireland**, Characteristic Statements form part of the quality arrangements for higher education providers.

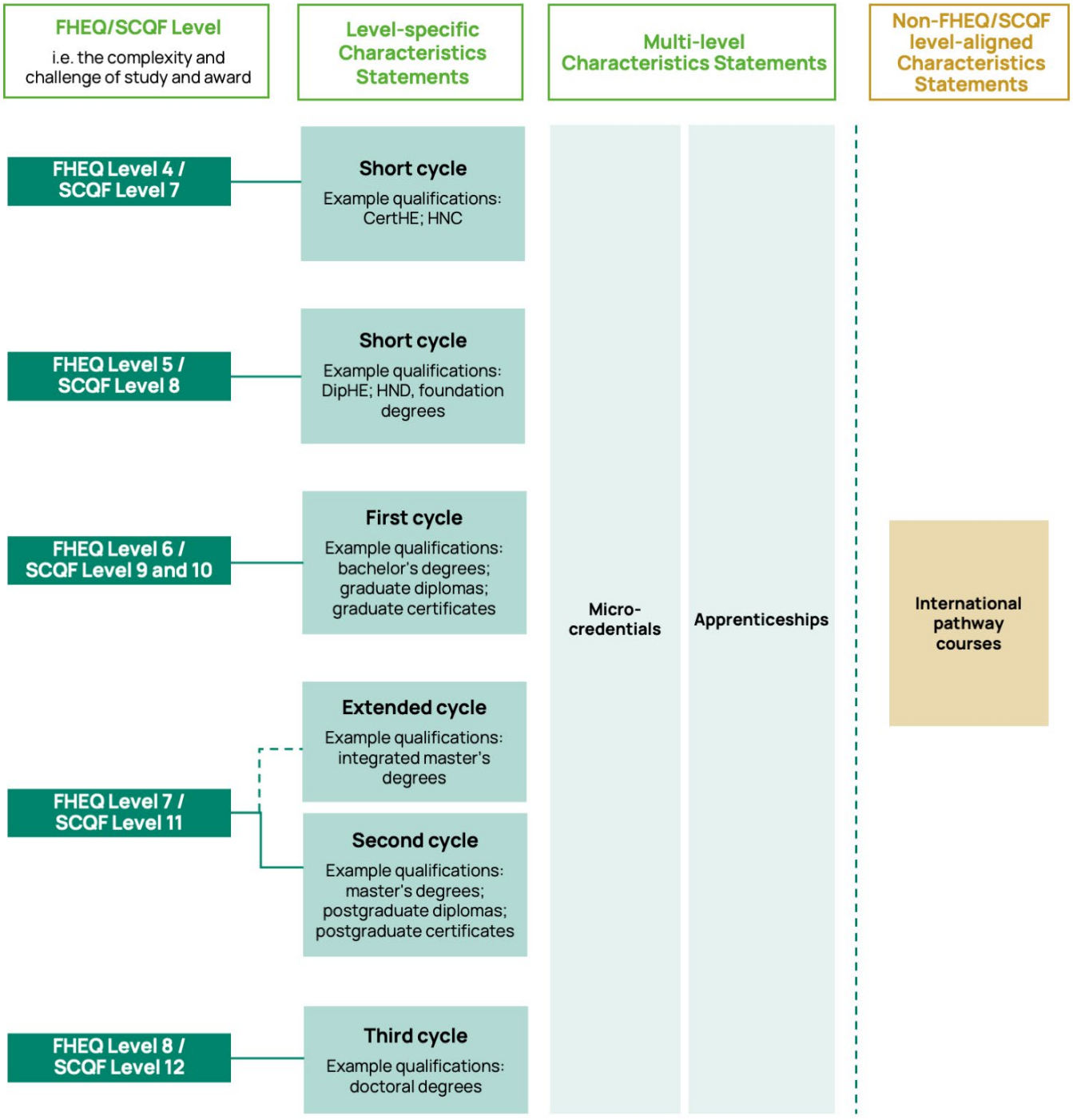
The purposes of Characteristics Statements

QAA Characteristics Statements are technical documents that provide common expectations and foundations for degree awarding bodies as they design and develop new courses or review and revalidate existing courses. They provide information about the distinctive features and structures of different qualification types operating at FHEQ Level 4/SCQF Level 7 to FHEQ Level 8/SCQF Level 12 of The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (2024). See Figure 2 for a list of FHEQ/SCQF level-related Characteristics Statements.

As such, Characteristics Statements are designed to support the assurance of qualifications, its comparability with similar UK awards and its equivalence to other awards in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

A non-technical summary written for audiences external to the higher education sector - prospective students, parents and carers, secondary and further education providers, national career services, sector skills agencies and employers – is also available to accompany each Characteristics Statement.

Figure 2: The QAA Characteristics Statements in relation to the levels as described in the QAA Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies.





Each Characteristics Statement is written to:

1. Clarify each qualification type in relation to intended purpose

Characteristics Statements define and clarify **the distinctive nature of a particular qualification type.** This clarity ensures that any academic team can create a qualification that fully aligns with sector-agreed expectations and - irrespective of subject or focus - is comparable to other similarly classified qualifications.

The terms short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle have been chosen to:

- allow for a consistent approach that covers different levels of study across the UK HE qualification frameworks
- create direct alignment with the 'Dublin Descriptors' - the qualification descriptors for the end-of-cycle awards in the European Higher Educational Area (EHEA) as set out in the Qualifications Framework of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) and available in Annex B of the QAA Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies.

2. Confirm the academic/other standards associated with each qualification type

Characteristics Statements offer **a common framework for understanding the academic standards associated with particular qualification types.** They help ensure consistent standards across different providers, while respecting institutional autonomy, and help providers to maintain standards as qualifications develop in response to evolving policy, disciplinary and professional contexts and drivers.

3. Support the robust design, validation and review of qualifications

Characteristics Statements **outline the common features of particular types of qualification**, to guide course teams in the development and review of their higher education curriculums, pedagogies and assessments, irrespective of subject, discipline or area of practice.

4. Promote student confidence and informed engagement

Characteristics Statements help students to understand what to expect from a level of study and what is expected of them if they wish to succeed in their studies. This supports informed decision-making, on-programme engagement and continuation, and successful progression to next steps in study or work.

5. Enhance transparency and external understanding

Characteristics Statements help to **communicate the nature and value of qualifications** to a range of external audiences - including prospective students, parents and carers, employers, professional bodies, and international partners - thereby strengthening trust in UK higher education and building and maintaining the value accorded to UK qualifications.

Provision not covered by Characteristics Statements

It is also important to clarify provision types **not detailed** in Characteristics Statements:

- **Specialist 'licence to practice' qualifications** offered by degree-awarding bodies that are overseen by national statutory or regulatory bodies. Examples include Qualified Teacher Status (QTS); medical, veterinary or dentistry qualifications; the Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE); the Bar Practice Course (BPC).
- **Higher doctorates** normally awarded by research degree-awarding bodies to individuals with exceptional reputation for scholarship and research in their field. The most common awards include Doctor of Science DSc, Doctor of Letters DLitt, and Doctor of Laws LLD, although it should be noted that some awarding bodies also offer these titles at the initial doctoral level. Awards are normally restricted to current and former staff and alumni.
- **Honorary doctorates**, the award of which does not normally require academic standing and can be conferred on individuals in recognition of their outstanding contributions to society, a field or a profession.
- **Qualifications conferred by non-degree-awarding bodies**. Sectoral certificates and CPD offered by other awarding bodies such as the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH) and the Chartered Institute for Professional Development (CIPD).
- **Subject-specific or professional accreditation expectations**; these expectations are set out in the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements and/or by several chartered or professional bodies (for example, the Engineering Council, the Chartered Institute of Marketing and Institute of Mathematics and its Applications).



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Tel: 01452 557000
Web: www.qaa.ac.uk