

Characteristics Statements

Short-cycle qualifications at a glance

Essential facts for students and employers

What are short-cycle qualifications?

Short-cycle qualifications refer to **higher education qualifications that sit between secondary education and a full degree**. They are more commonly known as Level 4 or 5 qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Level 7 or 8 qualifications in Scotland. Common examples include **Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)**, **Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)**, **Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)** and **Foundation Degrees**.

The term 'short cycle' is used to allow clearer alignment with the level descriptors that sit on the [European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework](#). These short-cycle qualifications are typically characterised by:

- 1-2 years of full-time study (or part-time equivalent)
- a focus on applied skills and job-ready knowledge
- links to specific occupations or sectors
- standalone awards or use as a stepping-stone to a full degree.

Standalone awards, progression and embedded (break point) qualifications

Many short-cycle qualifications (such as HNCs or Foundation Degrees) exist as 'standalone' awards and are awarded to students on completion of the required number of credits and having met the modular and course learning outcomes.

Short-cycle qualifications can also support progression towards higher level awards. As students progress through an undergraduate degree, at certain key stages (normally at the end of an academic year), they become eligible for an award that formally recognises what they have achieved so far. These interim awards may be designed into the programme of study from the outset to serve as natural "break-points" that increase permeability between study and the workplace. Additionally in circumstances where students are unable to complete a full degree it is possible for them to exit the programme with a recognised, short-cycle qualification reflecting the volume and level(s) of study they have completed.

For example, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland a bachelor's degree at Level 6 may offer an interim award of CertHE after 120 credits at Level 4 and a further interim award of DipHE of 240 credits at Level 5.

As part of the [Lifelong Learning Entitlement \(LLE\)](#) in England, the government is encouraging higher education providers to provide 'break point' awards more consistently to better embed flexibility for students.

This Statement describes how students' learning is **formally recognised**, providing a **clear route for students** to employment, further training or another qualification. For employers, they provide a **clearly defined indication of a candidate's educational achievement** that can be compared and trusted.

Why might a student choose a short-cycle qualification?

Short-cycle qualifications are especially useful for students who want to:

- enter the workforce sooner than a bachelor's degree would allow
- work towards an occupational specific role where a short-cycle qualification meets the entry requirements
- stagger the costs and time demands of studying and build skills and learning in incremental stages
- prefer vocationally or professionally focused learning.

After gaining a short-cycle qualification, graduates can choose one of several routes.

They may:

- continue learning, with the potential to progress to a full bachelor's degree (sometimes known as a top-up qualification)
- start or advance their careers.

Why might an employer value short-cycle qualifications?

- They are recognised and quality-assured using accepted standards across all four UK nations.
- Graduates of short-cycle qualifications often have vocational work-ready skills.
- They can be co-created with employers and tailored to industry needs.
- They often include work-based projects, simulated learning or industry placements.
- They offer useful training for employee professional development.

For more detailed information on short-cycle qualifications, please refer to the Short Cycle Characteristics Statement (2026) which was reviewed by a panel of experts drawn from across the sector. Details of the Review Group can be found on **page 19** of the Statement.

Characteristics Statements are published in QAA's capacity as an expert quality body on behalf of the higher education sector.

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