Characteristics Statements
Short-Cycle Qualifications



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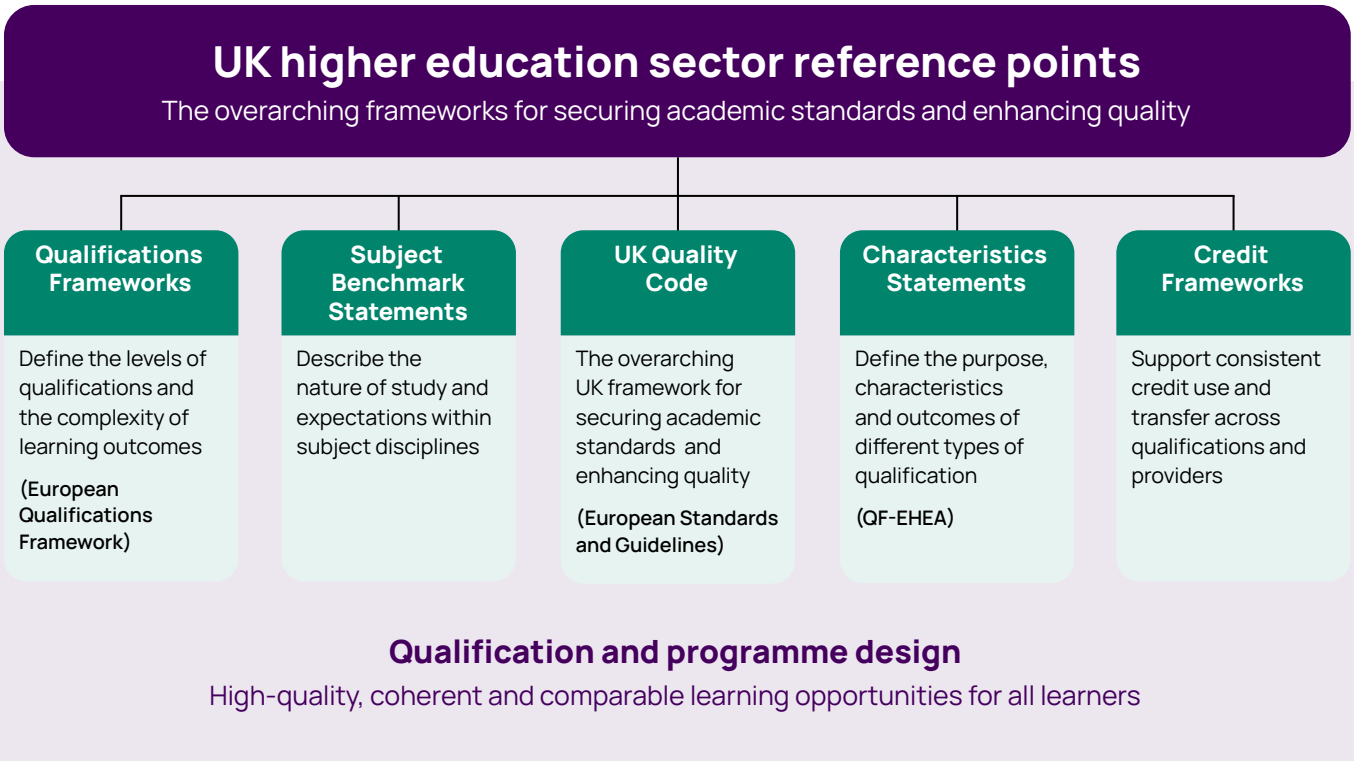
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1. Introduction

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 credit-bearing academic awards within UK higher education. Characteristics Statements sit alongside and 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), each of which contributes to the UK's comprehensive, robust and credible national quality assurance system.

Figure 1: Sector reference points for UK HE



Characteristics Statements provide a shared foundation that supports the integrity, consistency and comparability of qualifications at the same level of study. Level of study indicates the difficulty and complexity of the knowledge and skills gained when studying for a qualification.

There are two parallel frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies - one that applies to Scotland and one that operates in the rest of the UK:

- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)
- The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS).

The FQHEIS is fully integrated into the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). For the purposes of this Characteristics Statement we will refer to the SCQF as the primary framework for qualifications awarded in Scotland. The FHEQ is a component part of the Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales. 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. Qualifications that sit on the Regulated Qualifications Framework are not included under the scope of Characteristics Statements.

In practice this means that wherever a student opts to take a FHEQ Level 4/SCQF Level 7 or FHEQ Level 5/SCQF Level 8 qualification, they and other interested parties - such as employers and future educational providers - can be assured that it meets a recognised standard, is comparable to similar UK awards and aligns to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). In the European higher education context, the term short cycle refers to higher education qualifications that are positioned below the first (bachelor's) cycle, often with a vocational or professionally oriented focus. Short cycle qualifications were formally incorporated into the Bologna Process to recognise the role of applied higher education within a coherent European framework. The QF-EHEA was developed to provide a common reference point for national qualifications frameworks, promoting transparency, comparability, and mutual recognition of qualifications across participating countries.

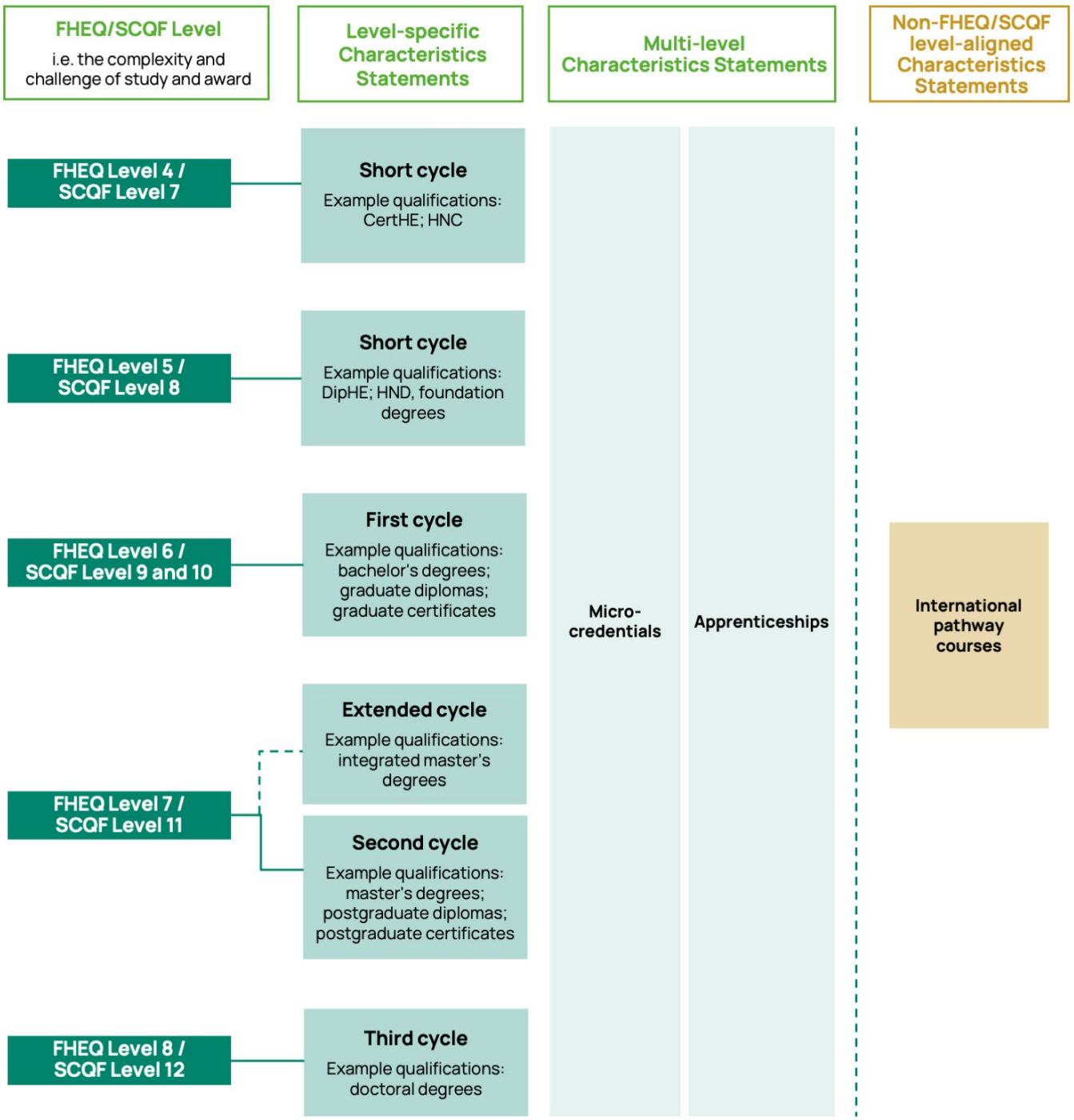
QAA has refreshed its suite of Characteristics Statements to align with the descriptor levels in the QF-EHEA of short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle. Further information about the purpose and rationale of Characteristics Statements can be found in the document QAA Characteristics Statements: An Introduction. A full list of QAA Characteristics Statements and associated 'at a glance' summaries, can be found on the QAA website.



2. About short-cycle qualifications

This section outlines common sector expectations associated with short-cycle qualifications in the UK. Each qualification should always be interpreted in relation to the specific regulations of its awarding body.

Figure 2: The QAA Characteristics Statements in relation to the levels of UK Qualifications Frameworks



Level of study, credits and learning hours

Short-cycle qualifications are awarded in the UK at two distinct levels of study: Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF and Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF. Each level of short-cycle qualification is normally defined by its associated academic credits and the nominal learning hours that will be required for a student to successfully gain the qualification.

As noted in the introduction, the FQHEIS is a constituent part of the SCQF and therefore refers to credit requirements; the credit arrangements in the FQHEIS/SCQF apply to all degree-awarding bodies in Scotland. All degree-awarding bodies in Wales have agreed to use the credit arrangements stipulated in the CQFW (of which the FHEQ is an integral part, forming the higher education qualifications pillar).

Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF short-cycle qualifications are typically awarded to individuals who have successfully completed a course of education and training of 120 credits (equivalent to around 1200 learning hours). Note that in Scotland the SCQF allocates 96 credits for some Level 7 (FHEQ Level 4) qualifications.

Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF short-cycle qualifications are awarded to individuals who have completed a course comprising 240 credits and around 2400 hours of learning, with at least 90 of those credits at Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF. These courses are typically structured so that students complete 120 credits at Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF before progressing to the Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF component.

The expectations about the number of credits and learning hours outlined above help to build comparability and equivalence with the UK and beyond. This consistency also ensures the potential for credit transfer from one awarding body to another, allowing for students to step on and off qualifications or actively build smaller amounts of credit towards the goal of a larger award. Further information on credit transfer and accumulation in the UK sector can be found in the Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Advice on Academic Credit Arrangements, the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) handbook. Providers in Northern Ireland use the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System but reference the FHEQ and the UK Quality Code.

The length of time needed to successfully achieve a short-cycle award will depend on the design of the course. This period may be influenced by the mode of study of the course (part or full time), whether it is 'accelerated' and covers a greater number of credits and learning hours than is normal during each period of registration, and whether it contains an embedded work or study placement.

Types of award

Short-cycle qualifications can be designed either as fully validated, standalone awards with their own curriculum and intended learning outcomes, or as embedded (break point) awards which operate as connected staging posts in larger awards.

Standalone awards

Illustrative examples of short-cycle qualifications in this category are Level 4 FHEQ /Level 7 SCQF Higher National Certificates (HNC) or Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE) and Level 5 FHEQ/Level 8 SCQF Higher National Diplomas (HND), Foundation Degrees (FdSc, FdA) and Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE).

These standalone awards are purposefully designed and validated as a complete course of study, with course-specific learning outcomes, assessment strategies, and credit requirements.

Embedded (break point) awards

Short-cycle qualifications may also be awarded to students in recognition of their achievement of key staging posts on their journey towards a higher credit award on which they are registered. For example, a Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF award may include an opportunity for an interim award on completion of 120 credits at Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF. Similarly at Level 6 FHEQ/10 SCQF bachelor's award may include interim opportunities at both Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF (120 credits) and Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF (240 credits).



3. What is the purpose of short-cycle qualifications?

Short-cycle qualifications increase the opportunities for students from a range of backgrounds and starting points to engage with higher levels of learning. They have a number of purposes, including:

- to create strong linkages between education and employment
- to prepare and develop students entering higher education directly from college or school (RQF/CQFW Level 3 and SCQF Level 6) for workplace roles
- to offer professional development opportunities and career-change pathways for those already in work or returning to education
- to provide varied opportunities to learn, each associated with the award of academic credit, which can facilitate progression to further study and qualifications.

There are many reasons why short-cycle qualifications are attractive to students and also employers. These include, but are not limited to:

- the needs of an employer or sector, that align to the knowledge and skills associated with a Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF or Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF qualification
- the needs of a particular profession (for example the performing arts) which require education and training to be flexible to fit with professional contracts
- the geographical and personal circumstances of students who may need or wish to undertake study in particular places and/or in personally practicable ways.

The key point across all these examples is that the quality and utility of the short-cycle qualification is not simply determined by its level, credit-structure or length. It depends on the purposeful design of the programme, the learning benefits perceived by the student and the outcomes of their education in relation to their personal and employment contexts.



4. Attributes of a short-cycle graduate[1]

Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF short-cycle qualifications align to the Level 4 FHEQ/7 FQHEIS generic level descriptors of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (2024) and the SEEC Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education (2021). They require students to demonstrate:

- an **outline knowledge and understanding** of established concepts, theories and skills within a field of study or area of practice, and a growing understanding of the limits of their knowledge
- the **supported application of this knowledge and understanding**, typically including the ability to making sound judgements by evaluating evidence using established principles, frameworks, criteria and techniques, and formulating proposals to address issues and problems in theoretical ways and/or defined (but potentially unfamiliar) contexts or settings
- the **accurate organisation and communication** of this knowledge and understanding and its applications, to audiences in defined (but potentially unfamiliar) learning, work or practice contexts
- a **forming responsibility** for personal actions and (ethical) decision-making, particularly where criteria, scope and parameters are defined, in contexts and circumstances that are both familiar and potentially unfamiliar
- **emerging independence,** which supports the ability to engage successfully in work-place learning and/or further study.

Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF short-cycle qualifications align to the Level 5 FHEQ/8 FQHEIS generic level descriptors of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (2024) and the SEEC descriptors (2021) and require students to demonstrate:

- a **growing knowledge** and **critical understanding** of established and more advanced concepts, theories and skills within a field of study, recognising competing perspectives and identifying where and when approaches and ideas are most useful, relevant and secure
- **increased individual capacity and capability to apply this knowledge and understanding,** typically involving the ability to make reliable and valid evidence-based judgements and formulating creative proposals to address a range of issues and identify opportunities in contexts of varying complexity
- the **effective organisation and communication of this knowledge and understanding** and its applications to a range of audiences
- an **evolving responsibility for personal and group actions and (ethical) decision-making** in contexts and circumstances where criteria and scope are more complex and parameters may vary
- **developing independence**, which includes the ability to actively plan for and develop existing and new knowledge, skills and competences relevant to the workplace and/or further study.

1 By 'graduate' we mean someone who has successfully completed a programme of study and been awarded a short-cycle qualification.

5. Short cycle: entry, structures and outcomes

Entry requirements

Short-cycle qualifications (both Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF and Level 5/8) normally recruit students into Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF, with the typical general entry requirement of Level 3 RQF/CQFW/SCQF 6 qualifications - for example BTECs; Advanced Apprenticeships; T Levels; A Levels or Scottish Highers. For some technical short-cycle qualifications relevant work-experience may also be permitted as an entry mechanism, using a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process. Entry requirements will be set by each recruiting provider in line with their general published admissions tariffs and policies. The Lisbon Recognition Convention aims to facilitate the recognition of qualifications granted in Europe. It provides that "requests for qualification recognition should be assessed in a fair manner and within a reasonable time". The recognition "can only be refused if the qualification is substantially different from that of the host country - and the onus is on its educational institution to prove that it is". The practical implementation of the Convention is administered by the relevant ENIC Network on behalf of their national authority.

Pass mark and award classifications

The pass mark for component modules for short-cycle qualifications relates to their status as higher education courses and is 40% or an equivalent institutional grade point score. Depending on the type of qualification, grade band classifications may be recorded. For example, Foundation Degree, HNC and HND modules or units may be classified in terms of pass, merit, and distinction. Any mark or award classification should always be understood in the context of an individual awarding body's regulations.

An awarding body's regulations will also outline the algorithms used in the creation of award classifications. This will include the clarification of any weighting, discounting, or borderline decision making normally used to determine a final mark and outcome. See the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment Principles for effective degree algorithm design (2020) for further details.

Short-cycle awards accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) may also have additional rules attached to them which govern an award and any associated professional memberships or status associated with it.

Progression pathways

Short-cycle awards are often designed with and endorsed by employers to enable direct entry into the workplace, or to support those already in work to build their professional skills and progress their careers. As such, students can use short-cycle qualifications to enable career entry and also career progression or change. Those who have successfully completed a Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF short-cycle qualification may choose a period of further study to gain a total of 240 credits to achieve a Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF award, if they meet the progression or admissions requirements set by their current or another awarding organisation.

Those who have successfully completed a Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF short-cycle qualification may have the opportunity to 'top-up' their qualification by taking a further 120 credits at Level 6 FHEQ/9 SCQF (and for honours in Scotland a further 120 credits at Level 10 SCQF), if they meet the admissions requirements set by the relevant degree-awarding organisation. Progression to Level 6 FHEQ/9 SCQF and beyond may therefore follow professional status pathways that have been developed in partnership with employers and/or PSRBs.

European equivalence

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), provides a common reference framework to support the comparison and recognition of academic credit and qualifications across European Higher Education Area countries and systems. To align with the norms of other European countries, UK short-cycle qualifications at Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF need typically to equate to 60 ECTS credits (equivalent to 120 UK credits), and at Level 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF, 120 ECTS credits (equivalent to 240 UK credits).

For the award of ECTS credits, the learning outcomes of a qualification must be consistent with the relevant outcomes identified in the qualification descriptor for the end-of-cycle award - the 'Dublin Descriptors' – which are set out in the Qualifications Framework of the EHEA (QF-EHEA) and available in Annex B to The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies. Qualifications can Cross Boundaries: A guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland offers an at-a-glance guide to how qualifications in the UK and Ireland compare with each other. It also offers a comparison with European higher education frameworks including the European Qualifications Framework, helping graduates with UK or Irish qualifications understand how they compare internationally.

6. Common design features

Curriculum, learning and teaching

As higher education courses, short-cycle qualifications need to build in and prioritise the development of students' academic knowledge, understanding, skills and competences – whether to prepare them for the next level of study or for work-based destinations. As a priority, students on short-cycle qualifications should have opportunities to build their critical thinking and analytical skills – connecting theory and practice and gathering and using evidence to develop thinking, identify problems and build creative ideas and solutions.

Students on short-cycle qualifications should also learn how to use the range of research approaches and methods to find, build and use evidence effectively. For work-integrated courses, the focus of this enquiry-based activity is likely to be applied or practice-based, to build evidence to address current problems, and/or create ideas for future workplace innovations and practices.

Short-cycle qualifications should also offer opportunities to build students' practical work and life skills including those of (self) leadership and the taking and delegating of responsibility, organisation, teamworking and networking.

There is clear precedent for some short-cycle qualifications, whether Foundation Degrees, HNCs or HNDs, to be more purposefully designed to formulate links between education, employers and employment. They can also facilitate transitions between vocational and technical qualifications and other educational pathways such as bachelor's degrees.

In these circumstances curriculum content and pedagogical features will be reflective of professional and sector expectations, with employers regularly and actively engaged in the design and delivery of the qualifications. The curriculum itself may involve simulation activities for those students who are classroom-based as well as reflection on and in work-based practice for those students who are work-based or have opportunities for work placements. The level and extent of work integration will depend on the qualification, its status and its purpose.



Example forms of learning and teaching methods include:

- **lectures,** which introduce key concepts to large groups
- **seminars,** which offer small group discussion and critical dialogue
- **workshops, laboratory/practical sessions** and **studio-based learning** enable learners to apply skills in practical contexts
- **problem based learning (PBL), case-based teaching,** and **project-based learning** encourage students to tackle real world challenges
- **work based/experiential learning, fieldwork**, and **simulations and role play** help bridge theory and practice, especially in professional or technical disciplines
- **flipped classroom approach** where knowledge content is delivered asynchronously online and through real time events -both in-person and online - to make the most of the social and collective nature of learning
- **blended/hybrid learning** or **fully online learning** which can be used to enhance flexibility and engagement
- individual and group sessions **tutorials** which provide more focused, and often personalised, academic support.

Other collaborative and reflective approaches include:

- **peer teaching and peer assessment, team-based and enquiry-based learning,** each of which are designed to help students to co-construct the knowledge and understanding
- interactive methods such as **sandpits, hackathons,** and **game based learning** are employed to support engagement and practical solution finding.

In common with other higher education qualifications, the content and curriculum and the knowledge, understanding, expertise and skills of the course may be determined by the awarding body. However, several other reference points and regulatory requirements (national and UK wide) may singly or in combination, influence and direct what is taught and how it is taught and assessed. These external reference points may also be integrated into awarding body processes and documents.



Assessment approaches for short-cycle qualifications

Assessment on short-cycle qualifications can take a number of forms but will typically be 'authentic' in design – a focus that has grown in importance in recent decades and regularly forms a central tenet of many awarding bodies' strategic curriculum and assessment frameworks, and PSRB requirements.

Due to the varied nature of registered students on short-cycle courses, the inclusivity of assessment is vitally important. Many awarding bodies now include guidance and expectations on creating varied assessment opportunities and events in their institutional curriculum design frameworks.

For short-cycle courses that are work-integrated or work-based, assessment may also align to the requirements of target employment sectors or workplace roles and requirements.

Assessment of learning on short-cycle qualification may take several forms, each of which is designed to evidence that key academic knowledge and skills and other work-ready competencies have been successfully achieved. Those short-cycle qualifications that are accredited by PSRBs, and particularly those that lead to a licence to practice within a regulated setting (for example *Foundation Degree in Nursing Associate Practice*) are likely to specify assessment types and timings to ensure that their expectations are met and graduates are fully qualified registered practitioners. Qualifications that are not regulated or professionally accredited will have more flexibility, allowing higher education providers to work with a range of stakeholders to design and develop assessment strategies.

Example assessment types include:

- **controlled condition examinations** designed to assess breadth, understanding and application of knowledge
- **online quizzes and tests** designed to test more focused knowledge and its applications
- **coursework assignments** such as essays, posters or reports
- **simulated or live brief** practical assessments
- **live or recorded presentations or pitches** used to evidence students' abilities to synthesise and communicate complex subjects
- **group projects** used to simulate 'authentic' work-based learning situations
- **portfolios** and **patchwork assessments,** in which online or physical collections of work can be demonstrated and progression and development evidenced.

Short-cycle assessments should also be developed in line with other relevant sector reference points (including, where relevant, QAA Subject Benchmark Statements) to ensure standardisation and equivalence across the UK higher education sector.

Subject Benchmark Statements

QAA Subject Benchmark Statements (SBSs) are a core element of the UK's higher education quality assurance infrastructure and are primarily designed to support the design and development of first cycle and second-cycle qualifications. As such, each SBS provides discipline or subject-specific guidance that will be helpful in supporting institutions in the design and review of embedded and standalone short-cycle programmes.

Designed and periodically reviewed by a collective of subject experts, SBSs help ensure that curricula consistently reflect agreed priorities in terms of knowledge, understanding, methodologies and practices. In Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, SBSs remain embedded within national quality frameworks. In England, while the Office for Students (OfS) does not formally require their use, SBSs continue to be widely referenced by providers as part of good practice in the quality management of their qualifications.

Importantly, SBSs do not prescribe curricula, pedagogies or assessments. They are designed as flexible reference points to ensure that diverse provision and institutional autonomy can be maintained alongside sector comparable, high-quality and inclusive education.

Professional, Regulatory and Statutory Body (PSRB) Accreditation

Licence to practice

Some short-cycle courses are required by law to meet agreed national statutory requirements to train those who wish to register and practice in regulated professional settings. For example, the Foundation Degree in Nursing Associate Practice is one of the routes prescribed for registration as a nursing associate with the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

These courses must show their clear and direct alignment to professional standards, which cover and direct areas of the qualification including the curriculum, taught content, requirements around practice learning and expected standards of proficiency to gain qualified status and remain on the professional register.

Protected status awards

Some short-cycle courses are recognised by PSRBs and lead to an entry level of professional membership (for example, an Institute of Chemical Engineering accredited foundation degree may lead to the award of the title Engineering Technician and the use of the post-nominals EngTech MICE). These awards may count towards further recognition that can be built either through the completion of further formal qualifications and/or work-based professional practice learning and may specify minimum time-expectations associated with this activity.

Occupational standards and apprenticeship frameworks

Occupational standards and apprenticeship frameworks, which are designed by and with employers and industrial sectors, may also prove useful reference points for a range of other applied courses in terms of designing curriculum and learning and teaching practices.

A limited number of credit bearing short-cycle awards are designed as the delivery mechanism for learning as an apprentice and as such will directly align to the curricular expectations set out in the associated occupational standard or framework. These are largely in the health field. For example, in England it is possible to study a CertHE or foundation degree as part of an Assistant Practitioner (Health) - Higher Apprenticeship, although this short-cycle qualification is not a requirement of the apprenticeship.

In England only, a wider range of qualifications in designated employment sectors can become approved Higher Technical Qualifications (see section 7). As such, they are required to align to relevant occupational standards where practicable.

The UK Standard Skills Classification: occupational and core skills

First published in November 2025, The UK Standard Skills Classification is a standardised list of skills, knowledge and tasks required for UK occupations. While not directly linked to short-cycle qualifications, the occupational and core skills are mapped to Higher Education Classification of Subject (HECoS) codes. As such, they are placed to influence ongoing qualification development as part of awarding body quality management systems, professional and statutory body accreditations, and occupational standards or apprenticeship frameworks. Core skills from the framework (for example planning and organising, learning and investigating, problem solving and decision making, digital literacy) are additionally well placed to align with awarding bodies' strategic curriculum, learning and teaching frameworks.



7. A note on other awards at Levels 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF and 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF

Higher apprenticeships

Higher apprenticeships can also form short-cycle courses. However, for the purposes of this Characteristics Statement, they are only classified as short-cycle qualifications when they are an embedded credit-bearing award at the appropriate level.

These distinctive awards are explored in detail in a separate Characteristics Statement - Higher Education in Apprenticeships.

Higher Technical Qualifications (England only)

Some English short-cycle qualifications may seek approval from the Department for Education to become a Higher Technical Qualification (HTQ). HTQs may be taken as standalone qualifications or may be an embedded mandatory qualification within a higher apprenticeship. To gain permission to advertise as an HTQ, qualifications must meet Department for Education approvals criteria. In brief, those seeking HTQ approval must:

- be registered with the Office for Students, with appropriate degree-awarding powers
- show that the qualification directly aligns to a relevant HTQ-designated Occupational Standard
- show evidence that the qualification has received direct employer endorsement.



The Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) (England only)

From January 2027, students in England will be able to apply for student loan funding for courses and modules at FHEQ levels 4, 5 and 6 in subject groups that address priority skills gaps and align to the government's industrial strategy at approved providers. This will include modules of approved Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and short-cycle qualifications at Levels 4 and 5 on the FHEQ. Funding is also available for integrated masters awards and some postgraduate courses. The LLE enables learners to enter, exit, and re-enter study over time, supporting lifelong participation and diverse learner journeys.

To be eligible for funding, modules must be:

- part of an existing designated full course, its parent course delivered by the same provider
- worth at least 30 credits, or a bundle of modules from the same parent course equalling at least 30 credits
- at a single qualification level that should be level 4, 5 or 6 to determine if they are eligible for funding.

To enable lifelong learning, modular provision needs to support flexibility, recognise prior learning where applicable, and enable progression, while maintaining academic standards and positive student outcomes. Although modules must be part of a 'parent programme/ qualification' to be eligible for student loan funding, it is important for providers to consider how processes, systems and delivery can be adapted to support students studying in a modular or more flexible pattern. To accommodate varied pathways and learner backgrounds, recruitment and admissions processes should enable flexible access and informed decision-making.

The maximum amount of LLE credit that may be recognised through credit transfer or Recognition of Prior Learning, and the minimum credit required to be completed with the awarding institution, are determined by that institution's regulations and qualification requirements.

Higher National and other HE equivalent applied qualifications

A number of awarding bodies registered with Ofqual in England, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland, Qualifications Wales and Qualifications Scotland, offer short-cycle qualifications, which are also credit bearing. Examples include Pearson's BTEC Higher Nationals, City and Guilds Diplomas and the Chartered Management Institute Diplomas. These qualifications are not always fully equivalent to a Level 4 FHEQ/7 SCQF (120 credit) or 5 FHEQ/8 SCQF (240 credit) short-cycle qualification validated by a UK degree awarding body. They should be considered on a qualification-by-qualification basis for comparative or RPL purposes.

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Dr Antony Aleksiev	Applied Inspiration International Ltd
Kathryn Butler	De Montfort University
Helen Collinson	University of Lancashire
Dr Brendan Coulson	Nottingham Trent University
Dr Jonathan Eaton	University of Cumbria
Dr Graham Garforth	The Open University
Dr Rick Hayman	University of Northumbria at Newcastle
Dr Maryam Idris-Usman	London School of Science & Technology
Dr Alykhan Alyan Kassam	Edge Hill University
Dr Claire Ketnor	Kaplan Open Learning
Graham Meek	Advance Assessments Ltd
Dr Emma Ransome	Birmingham City University
Marianne Readman	Exeter College
Gill Scott	Gill Scott Consultancy Ltd
Professor Sarah Tudor	University of Exeter

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

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