Characteristics Statements
First-Cycle Qualifications



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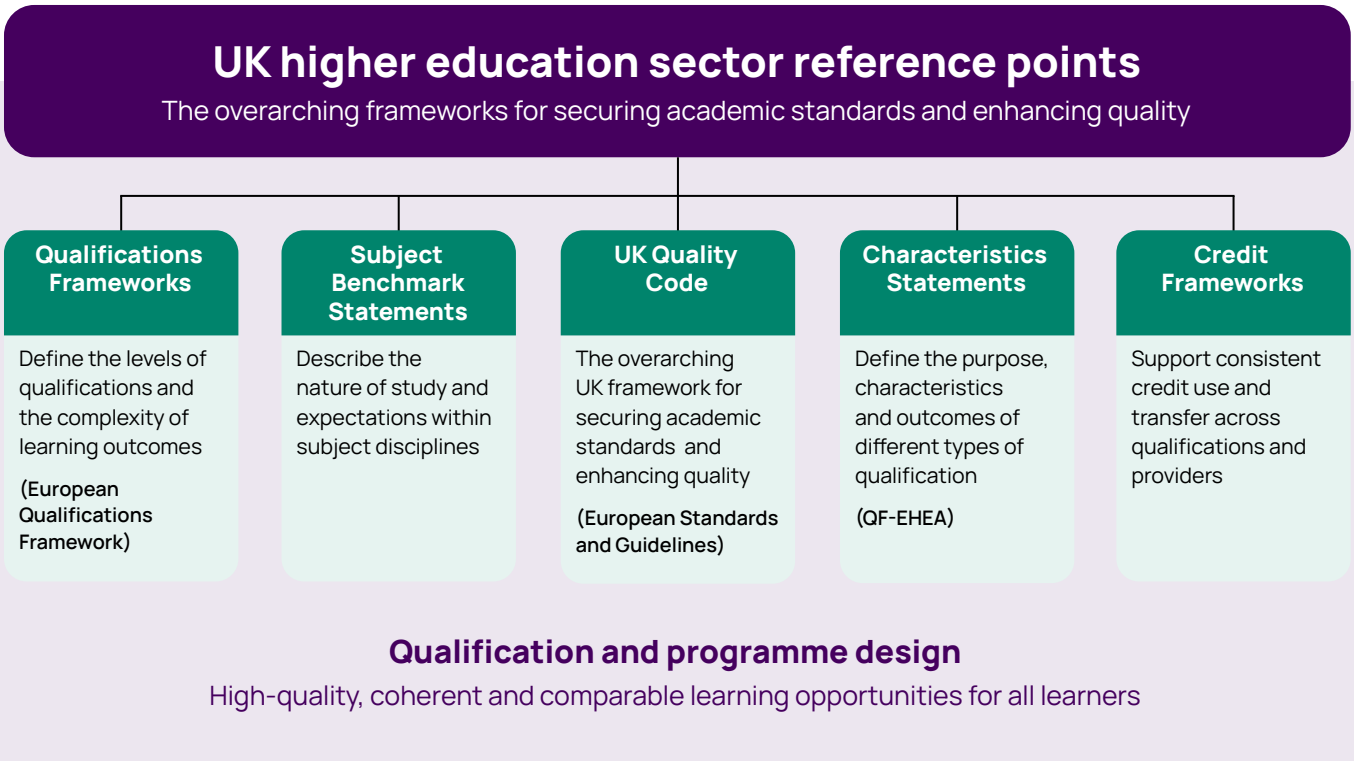
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1. Introduction

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 is awarded a FHEQ Level 6 / SCQF Level 9/10 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 awards made in the UK and aligns to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA).

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 Characteristics Statements: An Introduction. A full list of QAA Characteristics Statements and associated summaries, can be found on the QAA website.



2. About first-cycle qualifications

This section outlines common sector expectations associated with first-cycle qualifications in the UK. The FHEQ levels and descriptors relate to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the SCQF levels and descriptors to Scotland.

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

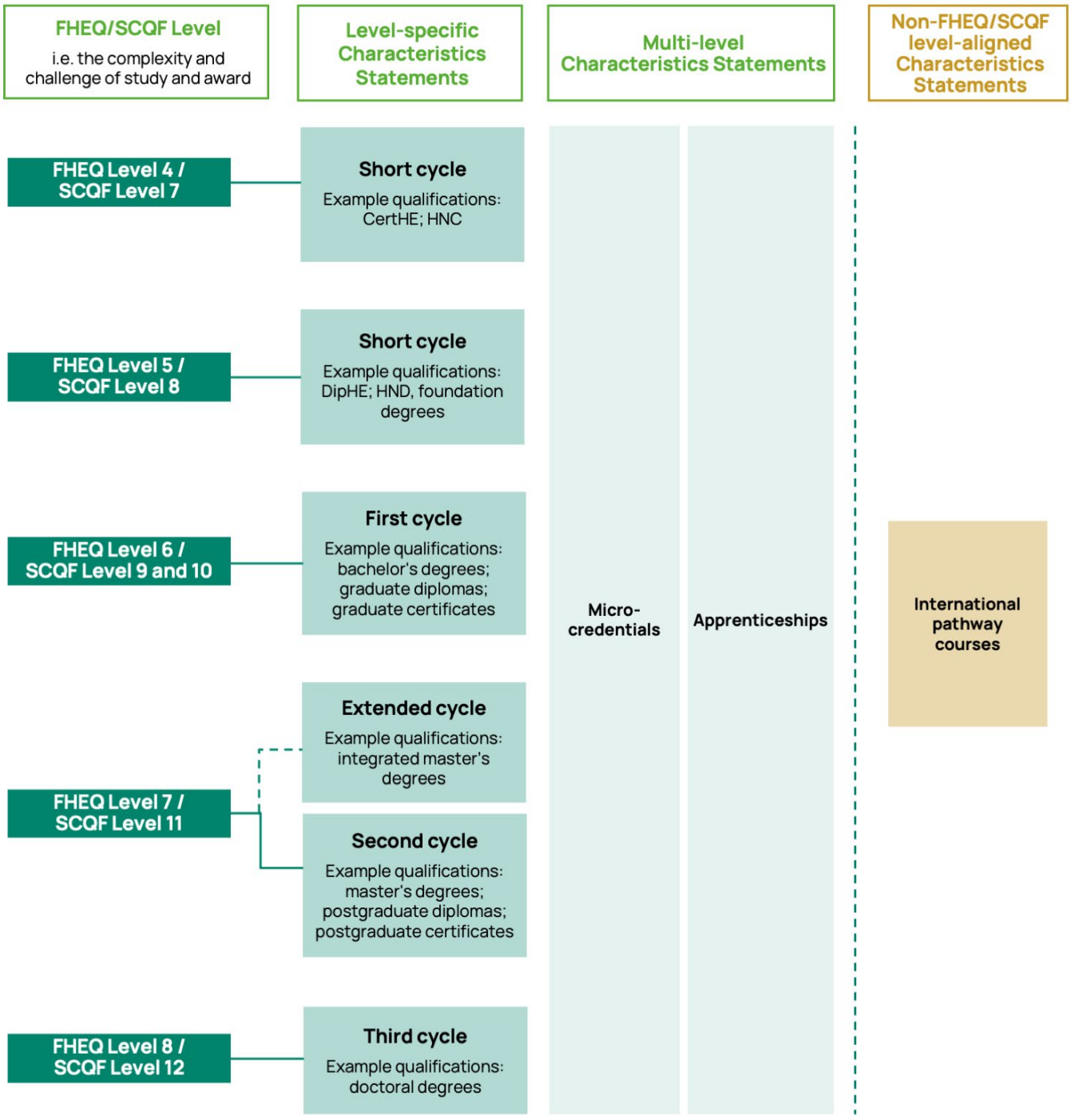


Figure 2 outlines the structure of the UK Frameworks in relation to their levels and the relevant Characteristics Statement. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland first-cycle qualifications are awarded at Level 6 of the FHEQ. First-cycle bachelor's degrees in Scotland may be awarded either as a three-year ordinary degree at SCQF Level 9 or as a four-year honours degree at SCQF Level 10. Both are recognised first-cycle qualifications, although they serve different purposes and confer different progression rights (see later sections).

Level of study, credits and learning hours

For England, Wales and Northern Ireland, bachelor's degrees typically comprise 360 credits (equivalent to around 3,600 learning hours in total). For those studying full-time, this is typically divided into three academic stages of study, normally associated with 120 credits at each of Levels 4, 5 and 6. Bachelor's degrees in Scotland typically comprise 360 credits for an ordinary degree and 480 credits for an honours degree, equivalent to around 3,600 and 4,800 notional learning hours respectively. Full-time study is divided into four stages, with 120 credits at Levels 7, 8, 9 and (for honours) 120 credits at Level 10.

Progression through each stage of study and level is associated with increasing complexity in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding, and growth in learner autonomy that culminates with evidence of independent learning and professional readiness. Historically, this has been provided by the completion of a piece of independent or group synoptic work towards the end of a bachelor's degree, for example a research project or dissertation. However, the highest level of academic study and achievement at FHEQ Level 6 / SCQF Level 10 may be assessed by other means.

The requirements to graduate with a first-cycle award should always be understood in the context of the programme specifications and undergraduate regulations of the awarding body. These will specify the number of FHEQ Level 6 and SCQF Level 9/10 credits required and whether a dissertation or project is a mandatory element.

Types of award

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the typical award title for those who complete FHEQ Level 6 and achieve a bachelor's degree with honours is BA (Hons) or BSc (Hons), with BA degrees typically associated with qualifications in the humanities and arts disciplines, and BSc degrees focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. However, some award titles are associated with a specific discipline, for example a bachelor's qualification in law is an LLB (Bachelor of Laws Hons). Information on non-honours degrees (ordinary or pass degrees) can be found in the section on entry, structures and outcomes below.

In Scotland, the typical award title for those who complete 360 credits of study (exiting at Level 9) and achieve an ordinary bachelor's degree is BA or BSc, with BA degrees typically associated with qualifications in the humanities and arts disciplines, and BSc degrees focused on STEM subjects. In law, the award title is LLB. To obtain the 'honours' suffix (for example BA Hons) as detailed above, students in Scotland are required to complete a further 120 credits of study. In several Scottish universities, the successful completion of an arts, humanities and social sciences degree at Level 10 may lead to the award title of Master of Arts (MA). Where this is the case, and the award does not include the study of any SCQF Level 11 credits, the MA remains a first-cycle qualification.

Bachelor's degrees may be taken as a **joint or combined honours** course, allowing students to study multiple cognate disciplines within the credit structure as part of one award.

Most bachelor's degrees with honours are studied on a full-time basis. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland they are normally associated with three years of undergraduate study. Some providers offer an accelerated award over two years of full-time study, taking a higher number of credits each year and often studying across the full calender year.

In Scotland, bachelor's with honours are normally associated with four years of full-time undergraduate study which in exceptional cases may be reduced to three years (see entry, structures and outcomes section below).

Alternatively, bachelor's degrees may be taken as a **part-time course**, often taking between four and six years to complete in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and between six (ordinary degree) and eight (honours degree) years in Scotland. It is usually possible for students to move between full and part-time study according to the student's circumstances and the provider's regulations.

Some providers offer four or five-year full-time programmes which integrate a **foundation year** (at Level 3 RQF/CQFW / Level 6 SCQF). These are for international students who have not met the entry requirements for the normal FHEQ Level 4 / SCQF Level 7 entry point to the course (please see Characteristics Statement - International Pathway Courses for more information).

Providers may offer a **'top-up'** for those who have completed a short-cycle award such as a foundation degree or HND (240 credits at FHEQ Level 5 / SCQF Level 8) and wish to add the 120 FHEQ Level 6 / 240 SCQF Level 9 and 10 credits that would lead to the award of a full bachelor's degree with honours.



A bachelor's degree may also include a placement either in a relevant workplace or in professional practice, or a period of study abroad, as detailed below.

- **A work placement, work experience or work-related learning**, sometimes one semester or one academic year in duration. Yearlong work placements usually take place after the successful completion of FHEQ Level 5 / SCQF Level 8 and are often termed an 'industrial' or 'sandwich' year which adds additional time to the total registration period of the bachelor's degree. Work placements may be credit bearing and may add further academic credits to the degree. Qualifications that include placements may explicitly acknowledge this through a suffix to the core title of the award using phrases such as 'with Industrial Experience' or 'with Professional Placement'.
- **Practice placements** are a requirement for all Health and Allied Health Professional qualifications (for example BSc Hons Nursing; BSc Hons Paramedic Science) that lead to a licence to practice. Practice placements are normally associated with a set number of practice hours that must be completed during the period of study. They are also integral to teacher training and other awards that are regulated by a professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) and lead to professional registration.
- **Study abroad components**, usually one semester or one academic year in duration and may be credit bearing and/or add additional academic credits to the core 360-480 credits of the degree. Qualifications that include study abroad placements may explicitly include this as a suffix to the core title of the award using a phrase such as 'with a Year Abroad'.



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

First-cycle bachelor's degrees are designed to provide students with a comprehensive higher education that supports progression into:

- graduate-level employment that normally require a first-cycle award as essential for recruitment
- further study, typically at higher qualification levels, in cognate or different disciplines (see the Characteristics Statement on Second-Cycle Qualifications for further information).

Historically, bachelor's degrees have also offered direct routes into professional practice. This is still the case for some practice-based qualifications overseen by PSRBs such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). However, other professions have different requirements that require additional study either through an integrated master's degree or postgraduate training (for example, the Solicitors Qualifying Examinations or Diploma in Professional Legal Practice).

Importantly, the quality and utility of any first-cycle qualification is not determined by its level, credit-structure or length, but by the purposeful design of the programme of study, the learning gains of the student and the outcomes of their education in relation to their personal and professional contexts and circumstances.



4. Attributes of a first-cycle graduate

In Scotland, ordinary bachelor's degrees align with the SCQF Level 9 descriptors found in The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (2024) and require students to demonstrate the following attributes.

- Independent learning and readiness for further study or employment, including the ability to take responsibility for aspects of learning and work, and to exercise judgement in defined contexts.
- A broad and integrated knowledge and understanding of their discipline or practice area, including awareness of its key concepts, theories, principles and applications.
- Analytical and problem-solving skills, including the ability to evaluate information, identify and address problems, and reach informed conclusions using appropriate concepts and evidence.
- The ability to locate, interpret and use information, research and evidence to support enquiry, problem solving, decision making and the effective communication of ideas to a range of audiences.
- Ethical awareness and responsible practice, including consideration of sustainability and inclusivity.

Across the UK, bachelor's with honours awards align with the FHEQ Level 6 / SCQF Level 10 descriptors found in The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (2024) and the SEEC descriptors (2021) and require students to demonstrate the following attributes.

- Independent learning and professional readiness, including the ability to exercise initiative, judgement and responsibility in complex contexts and to plan for further study, professional development or employment.
- A comprehensive and systematic knowledge of their discipline or practice area, including current debates and developments.
- Critical thinking and analytical skills, including the ability to evaluate evidence, construct arguments, address complex problems, and exercise judgement in situations where knowledge, evidence or solutions may be incomplete or contested.
- The ability to locate, evaluate and apply research, scholarship and evidence to inform enquiry, problem solving, decision making and the effective communication of complex ideas to specialist and non-specialist audiences.
- Ethical awareness and responsibility, including consideration of sustainability and inclusivity.

5. First cycle: entry, structures and outcomes

Entry requirements

Typical entry routes for first-cycle qualifications include subject-relevant RQF/CQFW Level 3 / SCQF Level 6 qualifications (for example A Levels, T Levels, BTEC Nationals, Scottish Highers and Scottish Vocational Qualifications), advanced and modern apprenticeships, Access to Higher Education courses, and recognition of prior learning (RPL) for other learners.

In Scotland, while most bachelor's with honours courses are advertised as requiring four years of study, some institutions may offer direct entry to Level 8 SCQF for applicants with outstanding grades in Advanced Highers and other equivalent qualifications. This means students may be able to complete a bachelor's with honours qualification in three years of study instead of four.

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 a first-cycle qualification is 40% or an equivalent institutional grade point score. On completion of the full first-cycle award, including component Level 6 FHEQ / Level 10 SCQF credits, successful graduates will achieve one of the 'honours' degree award classifications of First Class, Upper Second (2:1), Lower Second (2:2) or Third Class.

In Scotland, on completion of a 360-credit **ordinary degree** (exiting after Level 9), a student will typically receive a classification of Pass, Merit or Distinction.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, an **ordinary (non-honours) degree**, sometimes referred to as a 'pass' degree, is awarded where a candidate has not been able to meet the levels of academic achievement associated with an honours degree. This may be to do with the overall marks awarded that fall below the lowest honours classification of Third Class (40%-50% marking range) or that the full 120 credits of Level 6 study have not been completed.

It is always important to understand any first-cycle mark and classification in the context of its individual awarding body's undergraduate regulations. These undergraduate regulations will also outline any algorithms used in the creation of the award classifications. This will include the clarification of any weighting, discounting, or borderline decision making normally used to determine a final mark and outcome (further information about degree algorithms can be found in Principles for effective degree algorithm design).

Progression pathways

The successful completion of a first-cycle qualification may lead to one of several different graduate destinations.

- **Graduate employment:** A bachelor's degree is purposefully designed to support direct entry into the workplace in regulated and non-regulated sectors. The award should also prepare graduates for professional self-employment and entrepreneurship.
- **Second-cycle qualifications:** First-cycle graduates may choose to register on a standalone or conversion FHEQ Level 7 / SCQF Level 11 qualification. Conversion qualifications support students to move to a non-cognate area of study or professional practice, drawing on and applying graduate-level skills to a different subject or area of practice. Conversion courses also allow students to obtain professional accreditation in their original discipline where the bachelor's award did not itself confer it (see also professional training qualifications below).
- **Professional training:** These profession-specific conversion courses are often described as occupational entry courses. Examples include School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) leading to a qualified teacher status (QTS) which is valid for practice in England and Wales and the Solicitor's Qualifying Examinations (SQE) leading to the right to practice as a solicitor in England and Wales. Examples in Scotland include the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) leading to Full Registration by the General Teaching Council for Scotland, and the Diploma in Professional Legal Practice leading to the right to practice as a solicitor in Scotland granted by the Law Society of Scotland.
- **Third-cycle qualifications:** In some limited cases, those with bachelor's degrees may progress directly to a FHEQ Level 8 / SCQF Level 12 research degree. This is most likely to occur if the graduate has achieved the highest possible outcome at Level 6/10 and/or registers on what is sometimes termed a 1+3 pathway, with the first stages of the four years of doctoral study spent gaining a Master of Research (see Second-Cycle Characteristics Statement for further details).



Relationship to other awards

Short-cycle awards: Each of the first cycle three or four levels of study may be identified as having a separate destination point with an associated qualification. This allows learners who successfully complete FHEQ Levels 4/5 or SCQF Levels 7/8 natural 'break points' when they can choose to leave the programme and graduate with an appropriate short-cycle qualification. More detailed discussion of short-cycle qualifications to support the development of flexible first-cycle courses with identified break points can be found in the Short-Cycle Characteristics Statement.

Integrated master's qualifications: There is a possibility that those who have initially registered for a bachelor's award as part of their initial study period can transfer to a cognate integrated master's degree at the end of FHEQ Level 5 / SCQF Level 8/9 or possibly earlier. To do this they may need to meet enhanced progression thresholds (which are often determined by PSRB requirements) set out by each individual awarding body's academic regulations. Further information about integrated master's awards can be found in a separate Characteristics Statement.

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, bachelor's degrees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland need typically to equate to 180 ECTS credits (equivalent to 360 credits at FHEQ Level 6). Due to the longer credit duration of its honours degrees, Scotland is an exception to the wider equivalencies seen elsewhere in the UK. The 480-credit SCQF Level 10 honours degree (technically equivalent to 240 ECTS credits) aligns to the equivalent first-cycle qualifications in the QF-EHEA.

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 which are set out in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (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 different jurisdictions compare with each other. It also offers a comparison with European higher education frameworks, helping graduates with UK or Irish qualifications understand how they compare internationally.

6. Common design features

Curriculum, learning and teaching

First-cycle qualifications often lead to an element of subject specialisation early on with single honours degrees (focused on single or multiple closely cognate disciplines) forming a significant grouping of qualifications in this category. A qualification at FHEQ Level 6 / SCQF Level 10 therefore indicates that a graduate has undertaken in-depth study, allowing for an initial level of specialisation in terms of knowledge and understanding (some of it at the current boundaries of the discipline or field of practice), and academic, transferable and employability skills. In Scotland, an ordinary degree at Level 9 indicates that a graduate has begun to specialise, allowing for the development of more specialist and focused knowledge and understanding, and academic, transferable and employability skills (although in some cases, Level 9 can be the specialist year for PSRB-regulated degrees).

Learning, teaching and assessment strategies are therefore designed to support progressive development across the qualification. As students advance through a degree programme they are expected to demonstrate increasing autonomy, critical judgement, intellectual independence and command of subject knowledge, methods and techniques.

First-cycle awards are predominantly taught programmes. Learning and teaching methods vary according to subject, discipline and mode of study but may 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.

At FHEQ Level 6 / SCQF Levels 9/10, teaching typically transitions from mainly classroom-based group approaches, found in the earlier part of the degree, to an enquiry-led curriculum that includes a greater element of one-to-one or small group supervision. This is frequently, but not always, associated with a synoptic capstone project or dissertation which aligns more closely with the pedagogy of postgraduate degrees and can serve as a mechanism to develop learner independence.

For some subject areas, between 20 and 40 of the 120 credits awarded at FHEQ Level 6 and 30 and 60 of the 120 credits awarded at SCQF Level 10 are associated with an independent synoptic project or research dissertation, although some programmes locate a significant research project at Level 9 of the SCQF.

In common with other higher education qualifications, the content and curriculum and the knowledge, understanding, expertise and skills of the course is usually 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 first-cycle qualifications

Assessment of learning on first-cycle qualifications 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. **Inclusive assessment** is the design and implementation of assessment that enables all students to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes in a fair, valid and accessible way, by anticipating diversity in learners and minimising unnecessary barriers to participation and success.

Example assessment types for first-cycle qualifications can include:

- **controlled condition examinations** designed to assess breadth, understanding and application of knowledge
- **online tests** designed to test more focused knowledge and its applications
- **coursework assignments** such as dissertations, essays, posters or reports
- **practical assessments,** both simulated or live brief
- **live or recorded presentations or pitches** used to evidence students' abilities to synthesise and communicate complex subjects
- **individual or 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.

Assessment on professionally-focused first-cycle qualifications can take various 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.

For more detailed guidance on assessment design, especially in relation to assessment validity and integrity, please see Quality Code Advice and Guidance - Principle 11 Teaching, learning and assessment.

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 awards, although a number also cover second-cycle awards. Each SBS provides discipline or field-specific guidance to support institutions in the design of new first-cycle programmes and the review of existing ones.

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) regulatory framework does not formally require their use, SBSs continue to be widely referenced by providers as part of good practice in the quality design and management of their qualifications.

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

Professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) Accreditation

Licence to practice

Some first-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. Some of the most rigorous examples of this can be found in health and education where the licence to practice, for example as a nurse, social worker or teacher, requires the completion of a designated course validated by an approved educational provider.

These courses must show their clear and direct alignment with professional standards, which significantly influence the curriculum, taught content, assessment design, practice learning, progression thresholds, and the standards of proficiency to gain qualified status and remain on the professional register.

Protected status awards

Other first-cycle courses may be accredited by professional and regulatory bodies as initial or preparatory training which confers legally protected and designated chartered or professional credentials, postnominal letters and/or titles. This protected status is used to ensure the highest levels of competence, ethical training and professional standing. However, while protected, with individuals maintaining status through ongoing professional development and registration, it is not a required licence to practice in these professions.

Examples of protected titles include Chartered Engineer and Chartered Accountant (with the Chartered prefix reserved for those organisations registered with the Privy Council) and podiatrist, social worker and barrister.

A first-cycle qualification may only partially satisfy the requirements set by a regulatory or professional body and students may need to engage in further study (a professionally accredited qualification often at FHEQ Level 7 / SCQF Level 11 or above). For example, an accredited bachelor's degree in engineering typically requires additional master's-level study to satisfy the educational requirements for Chartered Engineer (CEng) registration. Graduates must nevertheless normally complete the required professional experience and assessment processes before achieving chartered status.

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 first-cycle degrees, the Occupational and Core Skills are mapped to Higher Education Classification of Subject (HECoS) codes. As such, they are well placed to influence qualification development going forward 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) align with graduate attributes (see above) and elements of awarding bodies' strategic curriculum and learning and teaching frameworks.

On-course guidance and support

Each educational provider can offer on-course academic advice, guidance and support in the manner that best suits their students and their institutional setting. Traditionally, first-cycle qualification advice, guidance and support have been offered through a series of group and personal tutoring sessions, supplemented by opportunities to book individual meetings with academic tutors during designated office hours. This model may be adapted as necessary to ensure that skills, work-based learning, professional placements and periods of study abroad can also be supported. Wider institutional support systems such as student well-being and mental health play an increasingly important role in the student life cycle journey - please see Quality Code Advice and Guidance - Principle 10 Supporting students to achieve their potential for more information.

An important aspect of any guidance and support for first-cycle awards is focused support for students who transition onto the programme of study from related educational settings. Students moving from an integrated foundation year to the first year of a bachelor's programme may need support adjusting to the increased expectations around learner independence. Similarly, students who have completed a short-cycle qualification (such as an HND) and enter a programme to a top-up year may need bespoke support to help them make the transition from one level to another. This includes support and guidance regarding the specific expectations of this final stage of learning, especially if an independent project or dissertation forms a significant part of the final year.

Some institutions are additionally supplementing this academic model with career or skills coaches - specialist roles that have emerged as a sectoral response to the needs of certain learners, such as apprentices in higher education. As work-integrated learning rises in prominence in other qualifications, the coaching approach that has proved important for linking education and work in apprenticeships can also help to bridge and link the two settings for other students.

Some licence to practice awards may additionally have trained work-based or practice supervisors who are responsible for the coordination and supervision of students learning in placement or work-place settings.

In Scotland, SCQF Level 7 is best understood as a transition stage. Many Scottish entrants arrive directly from Highers at SCQF Level 6, alongside some with Advanced Highers at SCQF Level 7, and limited prior experience of sustained independent study, extended scholarly reading, or authentic applied assessment. SCQF Level 7 will typically scaffold the transition from school to higher education, through the explicit teaching of foundational skills and a balanced mix of continuous and summative assessment with no expectations of tacit knowledge about higher education. Similar support may exist for students with Advanced Highers who directly enter at SCQF Level 8 which otherwise consolidates students' foundational learning and prepares students for specialist study.

7. A note on other qualifications at FHEQ Levels 6 / SCQF 9/10

Higher and degree apprenticeships

Higher, graduate and professional apprenticeships can be offered at FHEQ Level 6 and SCQF Levels 9/10, but for the purposes of this Characteristics Statement are only classified as first-cycle qualifications when they are associated with academic credit and named Degree or Graduate Apprenticeships.

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



8. Acknowledgements

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