# Characteristics Statements
# First-cycle qualifications (bachelor's degree)

A brief guide for students and employers

## What are first-cycle qualifications?

The term 'first cycle' is used in the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Frameworks (QF-EHEA) to describe the first major stage of higher education after 'short cycle'. In the UK, a bachelor's degree is the most common first-cycle qualification. It gives students the knowledge, skills and experience needed for graduate careers, further study and professional development. Most bachelor's degrees are awarded with honours.

During their studies, learners will develop subject knowledge as well as wider skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and independent learning. Many courses also include practical projects, placements or opportunities to work with employers.

## How long does it take?

- Full-time over three years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Full-time over four years for a honours degree in Scotland (three years for an ordinary degree).
- Part-time over a longer period, often between four and eight years depending on the course and location.

Some courses offer additional options, such as:

- work placements
- study abroad opportunities
- accelerated study routes (usually two years)
- foundation stages to help you prepare for higher education
- top-up programmes that build on short-cycle qualifications, such as foundation degrees or HNDs.

## What does 'with honours' mean?

Most bachelor's degrees in the UK are awarded with honours, often shown as BA (Hons) or BSc (Hons). Honours degrees demonstrate that you have successfully completed the full programme of study and achieved the required academic standards. In Scotland, an honours degree is usually awarded after four years of study.

## Flexible study and break points

Many bachelor's degree programmes are designed with flexibility in mind. Most bachelor's degrees include recognised 'break' points where you may be able to leave with a short-cycle qualification that recognises what you have already achieved, such as a Certificate or Diploma of Higher Education.

## Who is a bachelor's degree suitable for?

Bachelor's degrees are suitable for learners who

- want to develop advanced knowledge and skills in a subject area
- are aiming for careers that typically require a degree
- plan to continue to further postgraduate study
- want opportunities for practical learning, placements or international experiences, where available.

## What can I do after graduating?

- Enter graduate-level employment.
- Continue to a master's degree or other postgraduate course.
- Begin professional training in areas such as teaching, law or architecture.
- Start a business or pursue entrepreneurial opportunities.
- In some exceptional cases, progress directly to doctoral study.

## Key things to know

First-cycle bachelor's degrees:

- are recognised across the UK and internationally
- may include professional accreditation for regulated careers or protected status titles
- are quality assured through nationally agreed standards
- develop communication, research, teamwork and problem-solving skills
- encourages increasing independence and confidence.

For more detailed information on first-cycle qualifications, please refer to the First 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.

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