



Characteristics Statement

International Pathway Courses

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About this Statement

How can I use this document?

Characteristics Statements are used by higher education providers in the design and development of new courses and as a reference point when reviewing or revalidating existing courses. They provide general guidance for the distinctive features and structure of types of courses and qualifications, allowing for flexibility and innovation in design within a framework agreed by the subject community. Because the Statement describes outcomes and attributes of International Pathway Courses in a UK-wide context, many higher education providers will use them as an enhancement tool for course design and approval, and for subsequent monitoring and review.

Characteristic Statements are published in QAA's capacity as a membership organisation on behalf of the higher education sector.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Statement can be found in QAA's [Glossary](#).

Relationship to legislation

The responsibility for academic standards lies with the higher education institution or college that awards the International Pathway Course. Higher education and International Pathway Course providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them by their relevant funding and regulatory bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements.

Sources of information about other requirements, and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Characteristics Statement where appropriate. Individual higher education providers will decide how they use this information.

Additional sector reference points

Higher education providers are likely to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and industry or employer expectations. QAA has also published [Advice and Guidance](#) to support the [Quality Code for Higher Education](#) which will be helpful when using this Statement - for example, in [course design](#), [learning and teaching](#), [external expertise](#) and [monitoring and evaluation](#).

1 Context and purposes of International Pathway Courses

1.1 Context

International Pathway Courses (IPCs) is a term that describes a range of courses primarily intended to give international students an opportunity to gain entry to UK degree courses. They are aimed at students with a range of prior learning experience, which may include students who have not had the opportunity to study to a level which would permit them to gain direct entry to a higher education institution (HEI) or particular courses in the UK. IPCs provide an opportunity for students to adapt to UK academic culture, develop core skills, subject knowledge and confidence in a safe and supportive environment which emulates the experience of studying in an HEI. This should include awareness raising of the breadth of support services available to students and opportunities for differentiated learning according to students' particular academic background and learning needs.

As students who take IPCs may come from very different cultures or societies, supporting acculturation should include sharing and building awareness of national and institutional Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) expectations and protocols. This process should also embrace different learning styles and methodologies where possible so that the need to demonstrate skills and knowledge development for progression purposes does not lead to a restrictive monocultural outlook.

It is recommended that special attention be devoted to providing IPC students with access to support services for wellbeing, neurodiversity and additional learning support. Students from certain cultures may not have confidence to reach out independently for support of this type.

This statement includes, but is not restricted to, the course titles listed below. Reference is also made to the *Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF)*, the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)* and the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)*.

Course type	England and Northern Ireland/Wales RQF/CQFW	Scotland SCQF
International Foundation/Year Zero Programmes/Courses/Years	3	6
International/Global Year One/Stage 1 (Scotland)	4	7
Pre-Master's/Master's Foundation/International Graduate Diploma	5 or 6	9 or 10

For simplicity, this document will refer to course levels using the RQF/CQFW used in England and Northern Ireland, and Wales first; followed by Scottish equivalents using the SCQF. For example, Level 3/6 will refer to a course at Level 3 on the RQF and Level 6 on the SCQF.

The original IPCs were Level 3/6 International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) designed to allow access to UK higher education for students coming from countries with a 12+4 model instead of the 13+3 model favoured in most of the UK. This relates to the number of years in local compulsory schooling plus the duration of study traditional in higher education. Before the creation of IFPs, students without access to recognised Level 3/6 qualifications, such as

A levels or International Baccalaureates (IB), were unable to study for degrees in the UK. This is especially impactful for students where compulsory secondary education finishes with the opportunity to take exams equivalent to GCSE or Level 2/5.

IPCs now exist in a range of durations and provide entry at multiple levels to both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. They offer an opportunity for international students from various nationalities and cultures seeking to develop skills and qualify for entry to undergraduate or postgraduate degree courses. Although these courses are commonly delivered at differing academic levels, in line with their bridging function at different stages, they have a shared philosophy and objective - to prepare international students for successful engagement with, smooth transition into, and successful attainment in UK undergraduate or postgraduate study.

Fundamentally, IPCs should offer a contextualised understanding of an education system that may differ from the student's own. The purpose is not to replace students' original approach to academic study, but rather to enhance their intellectual and cultural transition to study at a UK HEI. As noted, IPCs now exist in varying durations, with start and end dates at different points in the academic year. Some organisations have also introduced Accelerated IPCs in recent years which involve more intensive study over a period of less than a traditional UK academic year. Other organisations may choose to deliver extended IPCs which incorporate intensive language study before the start of the academic year.

While entry to IPCs is no longer just through a 12+1+3 format, courses should be tailored in length, content and structure according to the level of qualification that students enter with as well as the target level of attainment required for progression to the next level of study. It should be noted that IPCs should not be designed to provide students with an opportunity to bypass compulsory educational stages and milestones in their previous educational framework or culture.

IPCs perform an important function in helping HEIs and providers to diversify their cohorts, and to enrich the learning experience of all students and staff. IPC provision has enabled thousands of international students, who would not otherwise qualify for entry to UK higher education, to experience academic success and widen employability options.

IPCs can be delivered within a range of different provider contexts in the higher education sector, which include the following:

- HEIs in the UK
- transnational branches of UK HEIs overseas
- private providers in the UK and overseas
- joint ventures between HEIs and private or public colleges.

Providers who offer IPCs typically deliver an approach to education and curriculum development designed to accommodate the needs of students from a wide range of different cultural and educational backgrounds. A key element of courses of this type is developing transferable academic skills, English for Academic Purposes and subject knowledge at levels ranging from 3/6 to 6/9 (or 10 on the SCQF) or equivalent. Common features are the development of students' understanding of UK higher education culture, a representative range of assessment methods and good academic practice.

Typically, subject modules are taught by subject experts with close collaboration between language specialists and subject specialists. Ideally, courses should be tailored to fit the skills and knowledge requirements of the degree or field students are progressing onto with tailored elements for the specific institution to which the students wish to progress. Clarity of

purpose of the IPC is essential to: address skills and academic development; inform course design, and fit with the subsequent level of study onto which students aim to proceed. Ideally, the IPC will also give some consideration to the regional features of university study and pre-university experience, which differ between England/Wales/Northern Ireland and Scotland.

1.2 Purposes of International Pathway Courses

In summary, the purposes of IPCs are to:

- provide an entry route onto undergraduate or postgraduate degree programmes for international students who do not possess qualifications that are eligible for direct entry to these programmes
- support international student recruitment for the providing institution or its partner higher education institution
- equip students with the relevant transferable academic knowledge, skills and language abilities to study specific degree courses offered at undergraduate or postgraduate levels
- provide pastoral support and educational guidance to assist students in making the transition from their previous studies and academic culture into undergraduate or postgraduate higher education in the UK
- foster a positive approach to learning the acquisition of knowledge and skills to promote critical thinking and lifelong learning.

International Foundation Programmes (IFPs)

IFPs are courses typically used by international students who require a higher level of subject specialism at Level 3/6 for admission to UK undergraduate higher education than that provided by their home country's compulsory secondary education system. In some cases, IFPs can also offer the opportunity to compensate for a lower level of attainment during previous study at Level 3/6.

The standalone IFP at 120 credits (60 ECTS) is not usually considered a terminal award in the UK, although as it is positioned at Level 3/6, it can be considered to be a qualification equivalent to the completion of Year 13 in the UK secondary education system. Students studying an IFP usually work towards a particular target degree at a known higher education provider. However, as a qualification, the IFP is also transferable as it can often be used to apply for entry to other UK providers beyond the institution with which it is originally associated, although it should be noted that IFPs are not as transferable as standardised qualifications such as A levels.

Some international students choose to take an IFP before studying at Level 4/7 in the UK even if they already have the required level of attainment and specialism at Level 3/6. In this way, IFPs help international students acculturate to UK higher education and develop different or new academic and language skills before embarking on a full undergraduate degree. However, it should be noted that not all courses allow this.

International Year One

International Year One courses, at Level 4/7, are used by international students as a pathway to Level 5/9 of an undergraduate degree. Typically, the International Year One needs to include a significant amount of credit at Level 4/7 plus the opportunity to develop English and academic skills. Although this pathway is positioned at a higher level than an IFP, International Year One Courses share some features with IFPs in the opportunity for

acculturation to UK higher education and the study of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and academic skills. In contrast to IFPs, subject modules on an International Year One are likely to be more closely aligned and specific to the target degree than an IFP. In many cases, an International Year One will also be less portable to another institution than an IFP. Entry requirements for International Year One often require successful completion of compulsory education in the student's home country plus further study of up to one additional year.

Pre-Master's/Master's Foundation/International Graduate Diploma

Students use Pre-Master's courses at Levels 5/8 or 6/10 to qualify and prepare for admission to a UK master's degree at Level 7/11. Some providers offer Pre-Master's courses at Level 5/8 to enable students to come to the UK at a lower level of English than that required for a visa at Level 6/10 (English B1, rather than B2). In this context, students will already possess qualifications at Level 6/10 and need additional time and support to enhance their international learning in the context of preparing for their master's degree. Like undergraduate equivalent courses, Pre-Master's courses are also used to improve students' subject knowledge, study skills and academic language abilities. Where students already have relevant subject knowledge at Level 6/10, pathways may be designed which give greater focus on skills development than knowledge acquisition. Pre-Master's can also sometimes be used by students who wish to change their direction of study, post completion of undergraduate study. In cases like this, modules focusing on relevant knowledge need to be incorporated.

Pre-Master's should ideally encourage Active Learning approaches, which involves provision of resources and materials to students prior to classes so that class time can concentrate on discussion and problem-solving and afford greater opportunities for deeper learning. In contexts of this type, classes are deliberately not knowledge-transmission sessions but rather a deliberate attempt to foster critical thinking skills and to avoid didacticism.

A Pre-Master's IPC should not be confused with Pre-sessional Courses, which usually focus on study skills and EAP but do not typically include subject modules.

1.3 Characteristics of International Pathway Courses

IPCs are typically delivered by HEIs, private providers or partner colleges in partnership with an HEI. Teaching is normally provided by:

- subject lecturers or tutors from within the schools of an HEI
- subject lecturers or tutors directly employed by the pathways department within a HEI, or by a private provider or partner college associated with an HEI
- a mix of the above two options.

Typically, the modules and curriculum of IPCs include three core components:

- (i) subject modules in different groupings related to the requirements of different intended degree courses
- (ii) English for Academic Purposes (EAP)
- (iii) academic skills.

In certain cases, academic skills and EAP teaching is combined and ideally there should be a planned and interactive relationship between academic skill learning and development in dedicated skills modules and opportunities for learning and application within subject modules.

English for Academic Purposes

EAP modules typically focus on training in all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). Modules of this type aim to ensure that students who complete an International Pathway Course have an appropriate level of proficiency in the use of academic language for entry to their intended degree course. EAP teaching should cover academic English relevant to higher education study and assessment, including terminology appropriate for subject study. The result of this would generally be an exit level equivalent to at least CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) B2 in each of the four skills, and sometimes higher than this to align with individual HEI English language entry requirements for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

IPCs also commonly include module combinations which allow students who have already demonstrated the level of English proficiency required for their next level of study to avoid the need to study an EAP module.

Pre-sessional courses which do not teach credit-bearing subject modules are excluded from the definition of IPCs in this Characteristic Statement. The organisation [BALEAP](#) provides a broad range of guidance and support for professionals involved in learning, teaching and scholarship in EAP, and already offers a well-established accreditation scheme to establish and sustain the standard required of specialist courses of this type.

Academic skills

Academic skills provision plays a key role in IPCs in teaching and learning, and in preparing for assessment. Academic skills develop transferable skills and supports IPC students for progression to higher level study.

Academic skills provision typically focuses on time management, independent learning, developing an understanding of academic integrity, reading and note-taking, listening and communication, research, critical thinking, teamworking, and reflective skills and the development of confidence to engage in class with tutors and peers and the broader support services available. Ideally, IPCs should also engage students with a specific or representative HEI's learning resources, so that students have experience of using academic books, journals and academically-robust materials in addition to and beyond those available on the internet.

As with the development of subject modules, the creation and delivery of academic skills modules or the embedding of academic skills development opportunities within subject modules, should ideally involve a dimension of co-design with a host or representative HEI and the IPC provider. Collaborative working in this area can help in the design of modules to support students in achieving their progression target and their success after commencing a degree.

Subject modules

Academic content provision is typically relevant to the student's intended degree course, although students may also choose optional subjects in different areas of study. Educational content will generally be delivered at or immediately below the level that students will experience in their first year of undergraduate or postgraduate study in the case of Pre-Master's. This may range from Level 3/5 to 5/8 for undergraduate pathways or Level 5/8 or 6/10 for pathway courses designed to prepare students for postgraduate study. In all cases, the curriculum needs to assist students in developing disciplinary-specific vocabulary and a basic understanding of core subject matter before they progress to the next level of study.

Content may sometimes include some undergraduate or postgraduate modules that form part of the target degree course level. In other cases, modules may be delivered exclusively to international pathway students. A distinguishing feature between IFPs and International Year One is that IFPs more commonly provide a range of pre-undergraduate-level modules which develop knowledge and academic skills to support higher levels of study, while International Year One modules may incorporate a number of undergraduate-level modules.

Where Pre-Master's admit students who have already studied relevant subject content at undergraduate level, courses may be designed with greater emphasis on the development of relevant academic skills, delivered through the vehicle of subject-learning. Where Pre-Master's courses are used as conversion opportunities, more focused subject content will be required.

While the structure of these courses and the balance of EAP, academic skills and subject modules may vary, IPCs should not be predominantly language courses with subject-focus as a vehicle for learning English. Instead, they should be subject courses with language as a vehicle for studying academic content.

Student experience and transition

The student experience is a vital part of IPC as it supports international students by enabling them to reflect on prior learning experience and how it differs from UK higher education expectations. In this way, the IPC performs a bridging function from previous experiences and cultures of study to the context of the target HEI. The IPC should:

- support ongoing educational and personal development
- provide a pathway for progression to higher levels of study
- encourage academic, cultural and social preparedness
- take into account students' previous educational experiences
- develop transferable and independent learning skills
- promote critical thinking.

Academic acculturation and preparedness for higher levels of study can be achieved in various ways - through students being based on the same campus for their pathway course as for their future degree, or through close interaction and HEI experience visits during the pathway course, before the transition to the location of degree study.

In addition to the formal curriculum, IPCs also offer an important opportunity for international students to acculturate to a new social and co-curricular environment which can support engagement and achievement at higher levels of study. Experience gained through an IPC can help students understand and navigate local services and opportunities such as:

- accommodation
- finance
- transport
- health and wellbeing
- student societies
- learning support
- community engagement.

Delivery models

Providers of IPCs use a range of different delivery models for the courses that are offered, which includes the following:

- Delivery through a higher education institution (HEI):
 - course design, delivery and quality oversight provided by the HEI's IPC delivery department in the UK or on the HEI's transnational campus; some delivery and services may also be provided by other academic departments within the HEI, depending on local arrangements
 - progression routes identified at the HEI and sometimes at other HEIs if students do not qualify for higher-level study at the host HEI
 - course based on the HEI campus or premises
 - contract between the HEI and the student
 - visas obtained through the HEI.

- Delivery through a private provider:
 - course design, delivery and quality oversight provided by the private provider
 - progression routes identified at HEIs by the private provider
 - course based on private provider's premises
 - contract between the private provider or college and the student
 - visas obtained through the private provider.

- Collaborative delivery through an HEI and one or more private provider or partner college:
 - course design and quality oversight provided collaboratively by the HEI and the private provider according to carefully negotiated responsibilities
 - progression routes identified at host HEI and also possibly through the private provider's or college's wider network of progression routes where necessary
 - course based on separate private provider's or college's premises or on an HEI campus
 - contract between the private provider or college and the student, or the HEI and the student, depending on agreed approach between organisations (not on a case-by-case basis)
 - visas obtained through the HEI or the private provider, based on the arrangement between organisations.

2 Distinctive features of International Pathway Courses

2.1 Design

IPCs typically aim to prepare students for all aspects of student life on undergraduate or postgraduate degree courses. To do this, they will seek to involve students with representative elements of the formal curriculum through modules, lectures, seminars, practical or lab sessions, and assessments. In addition, students are encouraged to engage with the informal curriculum and co-curricular activities through events, university societies and opportunities for social interaction and personal development within the broader realms of student experience.

IPCs also sometimes provide international students with the opportunity to explore a variety of subject modules which they may not have previously studied in depth or at the same level. However, this is not always possible where particular module combinations are required for access to specific degrees. Notably, IPCs allow students at different levels of ability to develop their confidence for higher-level study while benefitting from specially-tailored academic and pastoral support.

Students who need to take IPCs come from a wide range of culturally-different educational backgrounds. Therefore, possibly more so than in other programmes, course design needs to consider the diversity of the student cohort.

In most cases, IPC students are most notably differentiated by prior learning experience at the point of commencing their course. While a shared aim of IPC students is to attain or exceed the minimum threshold skills required for higher levels of study, diverse student communities offer institutions a significant and distinctive opportunity to embed opportunities for curriculum internationalisation within IPCs and approaches to learning in higher education.

By using the international experience of the diverse IPC cohort as a virtue, IPC providers can collaborate with their students to co-create elements of the curriculum which will support diverse routes to knowledge development, critical thinking and transferable applications. This aim can be achieved through incorporating and encouraging opportunities for students to select or contextualise learning methodologies, solutions, approaches, applications, examples and responses to assessment. One key challenge for the teacher and the curriculum design team may be in the extent to which the diversity of the cohort is reflected and incorporated into the IPC curriculum and the extent to which this can be considered legitimately reflective of the learning environment at higher levels of study within the target HEI.

In contrast, IPCs delivered in transnational education contexts may attract a less heterogeneous student cohort, depending on the accessibility of the programme to students outside the host country. In this context it may not be possible to rely upon the diversity of the student cohort to help internationalise the curriculum through their experience and this may have to be achieved through use of more case studies or research-based activity.

Given ongoing increases in online modes of delivery even while on-campus for learning sessions and assessment, there is a need to modify IPC learning, teaching and assessment practices to reflect this.

For these reasons, it is important that staff associated with the design and delivery of IPCs have appropriate training and/or experience of supporting diverse learners from different regional and academic cultures, and how to uphold and raise awareness of EDI policy.

2.2 Structure

IPCs are often designed to last for one academic year consisting of 30 weeks x 40 hours of student effort, totalling 1,200 hours. Credit weighting mirrors the common structure of 120 credits offered in a year of an undergraduate degree course. Usually, that involves a combination of modules ranging from 10 to 30 credits studied full-time over one academic year with students needing 120 credits to progress. This weighting is usually the same for IPCs which give access to undergraduate or postgraduate study as Pre-Master's IPCs are also positioned at undergraduate level. However, it should be noted that different providers have multiple start and finish dates, and alternative course durations and intensities of delivery do exist.

Modules are often designed in consultation or collaboration with degree-providing departments in HEIs to ensure that students are ready to progress onto degree-level study at the end of the course. In the case of IFPs and Pre-Master's, these IPCs may be one-year standalone or integrated into a four-year undergraduate course or a two-year master's course. In the case of integrated IFPs, international students are more likely to find themselves studying alongside home students on the same course, unlike standalone IFPs which will be more likely to recruit only international students.

IPCs tend to use the qualifications of specific countries as the starting point for the development of the curriculum. The intended learning outcomes required to commence a future degree course should then determine the design of the IPC modules and curriculum. This practice should follow the principles of constructive alignment.

IPCs are designed differently according to the specific levels of access which they need to provide. For example, Level 3/6 courses are often designed in a more linear and developmental manner - first by scaffolding students in their learning and moving towards a greater level of independence to gradually managing the transition from high school towards the challenge of Level 4/7 and the subsequent stages of an undergraduate degree. Higher-level IPCs seek to closely replicate the experience of studying for a degree at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This approach allows students to have as authentic an experience as possible, retaining opportunities to build confidence and independence while adjusting to the UK higher education environment. Since the global pandemic, the number of institutions offering online and distance learning IPCs has rapidly increased. While this may continue to grow in prevalence in the future, it should be noted that if future higher-level study is to be engaged within an onsite, in-country environment, not all the features of IPCs, such as those which involve acculturation to new academic and regional cultures, can easily be replicated online and outside the country where the future degree will be delivered.

Generally, IPCs based in the UK have at least 15 classroom-based contact hours per week as required by UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) for visa regulatory purposes. Indeed, many IPCs have significantly more hours per teaching week. In the development and delivery of integrated and standalone IPCs it is important to note the different implications and compliance requirements related to visa issuance of which students and admissions staff need to be aware. This difference can also affect costs and marketing considerations for the course. If courses are being delivered online then visa restrictions and compulsory minimum hours per week will not apply in the same manner.

Standard design features include the:

- duration of the course:
 - over a standard academic year from September to June
 - from January or February until August

- from April until August, including a higher number of hours of tuition study per week; this is sometimes referred to as an accelerated pathway
- combination of elective and core modules allowing students to access specialist degrees while having an element of free choice
- opportunity for major/minor study options
- positioning of language and skills study components as compulsory or optional
- availability of alternative pathways for students with higher or lower entry levels of English language and academic skill proficiency, allowing higher or lower intensive emphasis on language study
- focus on study for the specific purposes of the intended target degree
- level of collaboration with the intended degree providing department/school.

2.3 Employability

As IPCs focus on developing skills and knowledge required for higher levels of study in the UK, the intended learning outcomes of international pathway modules may commonly be more closely aligned to the specific study requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate study than to employability outcomes. However, as the importance of employability skills continues to become more and more important with degree programmes, embedding opportunities to develop employability skills within IPCs is also becoming more prevalent.

In addition, where the institution integrates graduate attributes into its module specifications, these can also help students on IPCs to connect with opportunities to develop employability skills in more explicit ways at this level. As business pathways are common at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the teaching of modules associated with this discipline are more likely to embed opportunities for contributions from employers directly. Where students have access to broader student services, the option should also exist for counselling from Careers and Employability Services at the host HEI or pathway course provider.

The recent HEPI commissioned research conducted by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) and the polling company Cibyl found that careers support for international students is a key consideration for international students when choosing where to study. As a result, it is advisable that IPCs should include focus on employability where possible.

2.4 Accessibility

The existence of IPCs improves accessibility to undergraduate degree courses for international students. International Pathway Courses usually recognise qualifications from across the globe. Ideally, the IPC admissions process should involve recognition of prior learning through interpreting worldwide qualifications via [Ecctis](#) (formerly UK NARIC) and the expertise of Admissions Officers, to determine the current level and breadth of knowledge and skills attainment, and to identify academic skills, language proficiency, and subject-level bridging requirements. This process will help identify whether a student requires or is suitable for admission to an IPC to provide a route to future study at undergraduate or postgraduate level. In certain cases, students may be required to have studied a particular subject prior to joining an IPC or to have obtained certification of language proficiency by particular bodies identified as suitable for admissions or visa application purposes.

Admissions to IPCs is also partly controlled by visa regulations which require certain levels of qualification or measures of language proficiency for different IPCs.

IPCs also offer tuition in English for Academic Purposes to support students who have previously studied in other languages or need more training in scholarly communication for purposes of progression onto UK HEI courses at higher levels.

While traditional IPCs had only one entry point, additional entry points of January/February, and sometimes April, have been recently added. This variety of entry points can allow three or more intakes within one academic year, which can be helpful for students who are not ready to commence their studies in October, but who do not wish to wait a year for the next opportunity.

One reason for this is that some students come from countries where high school finishes in November, meaning that they would have to wait up to 10 months to begin a September Foundation. As a result, January/February and April entry foundations have had to be redesigned to allow for more intensive study over a shorter period. September, January/February and April intakes all allow for entry to undergraduate study at the start of the following academic year.

Courses often offer a wide range of access pathways for the study of different intended degrees. For example, some IPCs are available in remote study or blended learning modes. In addition, certain HEIs offer transnational iterations of their IPCs, delivered at overseas campuses. Additionally, providers of IPCs and networks of higher education institution-led pathways courses often provide opportunities to access degree-level study at a wider network of providers after completion of pathway study.

Visits by international pathway academic staff to targeted countries alongside pre-departure briefings, induction courses and websites, and buddy systems all assist students in understanding and accessing these courses.

2.5 Progression

Students enrolled on IPCs are often guaranteed progression onto a particular degree course at a specific HEI, provided they achieve a minimum threshold of performance on a course across particular modules. In some cases, additional progression requirements may also exist (for example, achieving a threshold score on the UCAT test for entry onto medicine degrees).

Required progression grades may exceed typical passing grades needed by undergraduate students to progress internally from level to level of a degree course. This is to align with the normal expectations of direct entry tariff grades required to join a degree, which are likely to exceed the requirement to simply pass. For example, students may be required to achieve a score of 60% or higher, as required by the target HEI, on a particular module to progress onto higher-level study, compared to 40% to pass an undergraduate module within a degree. Therefore, it is good practice for providers to make progression requirements explicit to students before starting their studies on IPCs.

HEIs may choose to recognise IPCs other than those they deliver or that are delivered in partnership with the institution as acceptable entry qualifications on a case-by-case basis.

Progression grades may be adjusted annually by International Pathway Course providers and Admissions Tutors in the receiving HEI faculty/school. Sometimes, students do not need to apply through UCAS to progress from the pathway course to the degree, and in other contexts, it is a requirement. For example, degrees that contain an integrated international pathway component will not require an additional UCAS application after the first entry point. Applications to Pre-Master's IPCs are commonly sent direct to the HEI or course provider rather than UCAS, given the postgraduate focus.

Students who are not eligible to progress to their intended HEI are usually supported in applying to and joining other institutions for their future degree study.

2.6 Flexibility

The course structure often allows for some choice in academic content studied, although restrictions may be placed on subjects that can be taken based on a student's intended degree course. Students choose their modules of study according to their intended degree course and most are required to study English for Academic Purposes.

IPCs are usually designed to provide a progression route onto a particular degree course, or group of degree courses, at a specific HEI. However, students may also present these courses as potential entry qualifications to any HEI, depending on the discretion of the individual institution. It is good practice for providers to make course structure, entry qualifications and expected achievement levels explicit to enable this flexibility.

IPCs can be standalone or integrated, which can impact application to study, and subsequent progression in certain ways. For example, students who need to comply with immigration requirements for study purposes can use a single visa for integrated courses. Standalone courses typically require a second visa application for the intended degree course after the IPC. This approach commonly allows students to apply using a broader range of English language assessments. Moreover, the standalone model provides greater flexibility in terms of progression, while the integrated format sometimes 'ties' students into a specific discipline (although there may be room for progression flexibility).

It should be noted that while many IPCs require students to identify a target degree for study, post-completion IPCs will also ideally incorporate a level of flexibility. Flexibility in this way could allow staff to assist students in identifying alternative study options, either in the original intended HEI or a different institution. A requirement for flexibility or guidance may arise if an IPC student discovers, during the course, that they are not suited or motivated to study the subject that they originally identified as their intended degree.

2.7 Partnership

To address student access and teaching capacity issues, over 60 higher education institutions across the UK, including seven in Scotland, have established partnerships with private providers. The partnership can include recruitment of students and/or delivery of academic courses. Partnership models can include approaches such as joint ventures with private providers, embedded private colleges on the HEI campus, and arrangements with private or publicly-funded off-site colleges. The model selected has critical implications for UKVI compliance and the responsibility for student sponsorship and visa issuance.

IPCs can also be offered at partner institutions overseas (franchises or branch campuses). These partnerships allow for the expansion of higher education provision in a given country, making foreign degree study accessible to a broader range of students while also strengthening the international position of the home institution.

2.8 Monitoring and review

Courses delivered by higher education institutions and private providers usually use monitoring and review processes that resemble those employed for HEI degree-level provision. Such processes might include:

- periodic institutional reviews/audits
- external review conducted by QAA (depending on the nation within the UK in which the institution operates)
- regular Boards of Study and course committee meetings
- external examiners and/or advisers to monitor and oversee assessment (and sometimes teaching)
- a system of internal moderation of assessments and annual monitoring reports
- a policy on peer observation of teaching
- student voice or student-staff liaison committees and module evaluation questionnaires to collect and review student feedback
- monitoring onward student performance and degree outcomes.

IFPs can, and should, also be monitored on a regular basis with regard to levels of progression from the IPC to degrees and the retention of students and their degree outcomes, post progression to degree study. Some HEIs and other providers have engaged in tracking-related activities which involve qualitative and quantitative measures of student attainment and experience before, during and after the IPC. This can allow IPC providers to evaluate their courses and consider new support mechanisms or opportunities to modify the academic progression requirements.

3 Content, structure and delivery of International Pathway Courses

3.1 Content and structure

IPCs are often structured into pathways consisting of a series of modules. Clusters of modules usually give access to degrees in different subject areas. This approach could include pathways in business, natural sciences, STEM subjects, health sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities. Depending on the subject area and the institutions involved, there may be different pathways and specific routes to particular degrees.

Each pathway will typically have its own set of modules alongside some compulsory modules for all students regardless of their route. These are often the Academic Skills and EAP modules. In some cases academic skills can be taught less discretely through embedding opportunities for skills development into subject modules. Modules to be taught are usually chosen in consultation with receiving degree-providing departments while considering students' intended areas of study and preferences, where options or electives are possible.

Modules are designed and set at the pathway level, immediately below the target level of progression. However, some pathways might include a combination of module levels with some from the target degree level. For example, some HEIs provide subject modules delivered by the institution's academic schools, while others convene and deliver the subjects within a pathways department or partner college, specific to pathways study.

3.2 Learning and teaching

IPCs employ various learning and teaching approaches to support the gradual development of students' subject knowledge, transferable skills and language skills. The nature of approaches to learning and teaching should be closely influenced by the next level of study for which the IPC aims to prepare students. For example, IPCs designed for postgraduate study are likely to require more emphasis on research skills and need to encourage rapid and proactive engagement with independent learning given that master's courses are shorter in length and more intensive than undergraduate degrees.

Approaches that underpin learning and teaching on IPCs sometimes include Task-Based Instruction (TBI), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

The academic content of modules is usually deliberately relevant to the student's intended degree course, although students may also choose optional subjects in different areas to study. Educational content will generally be delivered at or immediately below the level that students will experience in their first year of degree study. Content may sometimes consist of undergraduate or postgraduate modules that form part of the target degree course, while in other cases, modules may be delivered exclusively to pathways students.

IPCs are delivered by lecturers or tutors holding positions within the institution or by sessional lecturers. Students are usually taught in a degree style; however, lecture groups are often smaller than those for degrees. EAP or Academic Skills classes are generally conducted in student groups that are smaller than 20.

Like degree courses, IPC modules are delivered in several ways using different types of session, including:

- lectures
- seminars
- tutorials
- workshops
- practical sessions
- laboratory work
- clinical observation
- presentations
- digital skill development opportunities
- synchronous and asynchronous technology-enhanced activities
- use of virtual learning environments.
- independent and group tasks
- active learning approaches
- problem-based learning
- case-based learning
- work experience.

It may be the case that students' previous learning experience has been more didactic than customary in the UK. Consequently, IPCs tend to focus on developing students' independent learning skills within the confines of their academic disciplines.

During IPCs, students are also encouraged to develop transferable academic skills relevant to the UK's higher education system. These skills include time management, independent learning, developing an understanding of academic integrity, reading and note-taking, research skills, ethics, critical thinking, teamworking, listening and communication, and reflective skills.

IPCs also offer an important opportunity for students to develop skills and gain familiarity with methods and practices associated with practice-based or experimental contexts.

3.3 Assessment

The assessment of IPCs involves a combination of coursework and exams. Some courses require examinations to be held within the institution's examination period and under exam conditions. Others are entirely coursework based.

Assessment of IPCs can be seen to have two key objectives which support assessment for learning. One is to offer a student-centred approach to assessment that focuses on skills and knowledge gained. The second is to ensure that students are exposed to the types of assessment they will encounter on their follow-on degree programmes.

The assessment strategy for IPCs is usually designed to align with learning challenges associated with either the start of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree at the intended higher education institution. Formative and summative assessments are generally used. Academic regulations follow standard institutional practice. This approach needs to include training for plagiarism avoidance and penalties for academic misconduct, so that academic standards are upheld. Unsuccessful students can also resit. When considering the structure of shorter or intensive IPCs, care needs to be given to ensure that enough time is incorporated to allow resit opportunities, where required, in a manner which does not delay progression to degree study at the intended next opportunity. Where IPC to degree progression requirements are higher than usual progression benchmarks within degrees,

adjustments may need to be made to quality assurance regulations within an HEI to allow for resits at higher levels, where modules have been passed but not at a sufficiently high level to allow access to a student's target degree.

Assessment patterns for modules usually mirror the range of assessment methodologies that students would experience at an HEI, this could include:

- essays
- projects
- reports
- unseen or open-book examinations
- live or asynchronous presentations
- video recordings
- drawings, models or designs
- experiments or performances
- crits
- podcasts
- portfolios
- viva voce assessments
- seminar participation
- reflective journals
- annotated bibliographies
- clinical scenarios
- other new or alternative assessments reflective of the challenges and idiosyncrasies of particular degree subjects.

A common feature of assessment in IPCs is the focus on process and product work, whereby students are given formative verbal and written feedback on their work before being awarded a summative mark. Peer feedback opportunities are sometimes given to raise students' awareness of how to improve their work. Students are also encouraged to reflect on how they engaged with feedback before completing a final draft.

As with many degree courses at UK HEIs, students are often required to submit written assessed work online through Turnitin, which is used to help raise student awareness of appropriate strategies to avoid plagiarism and poor academic practice.

For courses at Level 3/6, students studying at HEIs do not usually receive a formal award on successful completion of the course, given that the level of study is positioned as pre-undergraduate. Instead, a transcript is usually issued to each student showing the percentage marks and grades awarded for each unit. In some cases, the HEI or provider may issue an accompanying document which serves as a formal acknowledgement of course completion. If a document of this type is issued by an HEI then this needs to be clearly distinguishable from the term 'certificate' which is reserved for undergraduate achievement through 120 credits at Level 4 or postgraduate achievement through 60 credits at Level 7.

Although HEIs are not technically required to implement external examining at Level 3, it is now commonplace for HEIs and IPCs to recruit and involve external examiners in the quality assurance process of agreeing suitability of examinations and continuous assessment, as well as ensuring reliability and validity of assessment outcomes.

Students on IPCs may not always be clear of the available routes for complaint and appeal and so procedures for this should be made clear from the start of the course.

4 Membership of the Advisory Group for the International Pathway Courses Characteristics Statement

We would like to thank all QAA Members who have engaged in the work supporting the development of this Characteristics Statement, and particularly the following:

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