

Education system

# United Kingdom

described and compared with  
the Dutch system

This document contains information on the education system of the United Kingdom. We explain the Dutch equivalent of the most common qualifications from the United Kingdom for the purpose of admission to Dutch higher education.

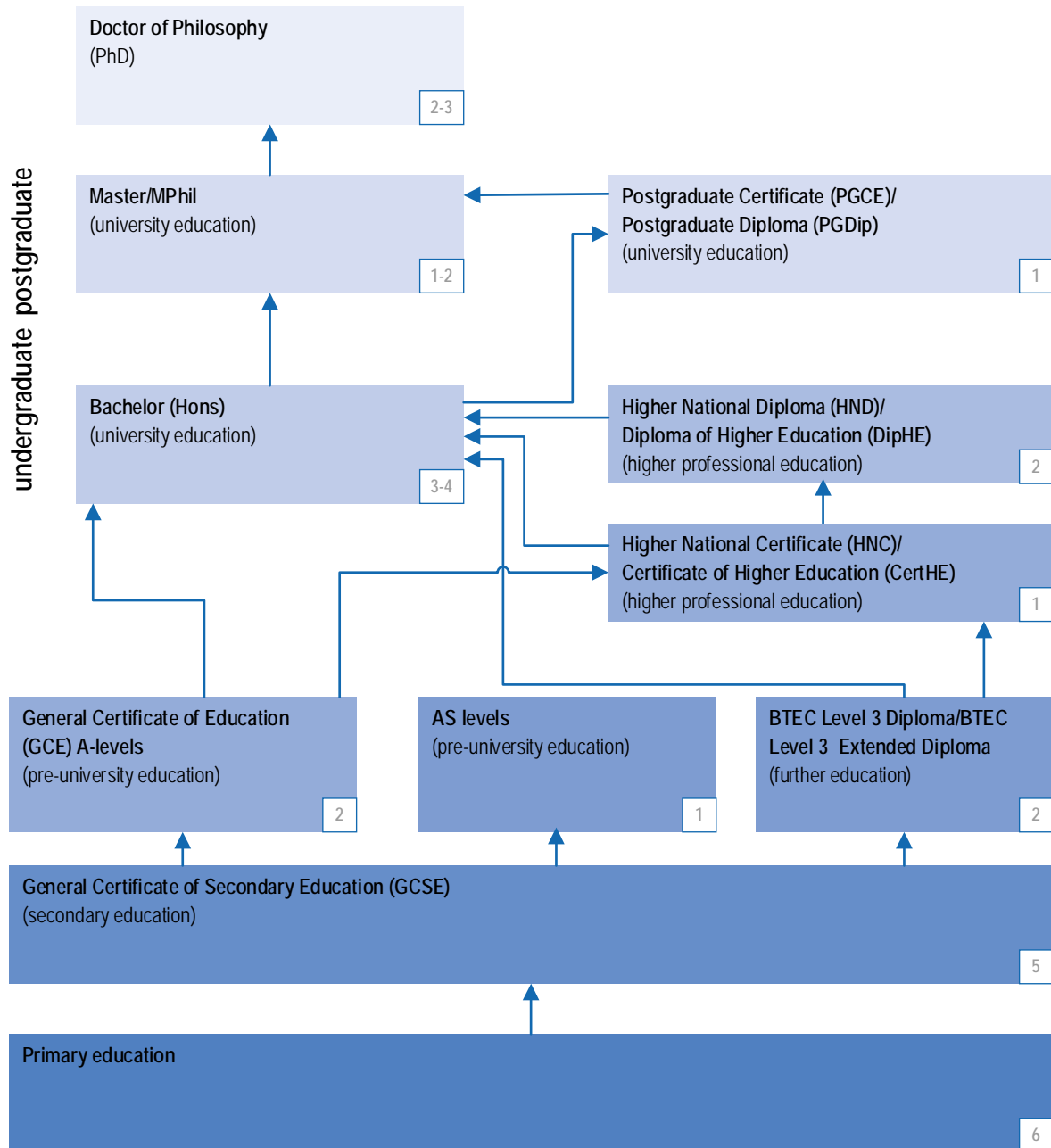
### Disclaimer

We assemble the information for these descriptions of education systems with the greatest care. However, we cannot be held responsible for the consequences of errors or incomplete information in this document.



With the exception of images and illustrations, the content of this publication is subject to the Creative Commons Name NonCommercial 3.0 Unported licence. Visit [www.nuffic.nl/en/home/copyright](http://www.nuffic.nl/en/home/copyright) for more information on the reuse of this publication.

## Education system United Kingdom



0 Duration of education

## ■ Evaluation chart

The left-hand column in the table below lists the most common foreign qualifications with corresponding levels in the national qualifications framework. The other columns show the Dutch equivalent along with the corresponding levels in the Dutch and European qualifications frameworks.

Degree or qualification and QCF level		EQF level	Dutch equivalent and NLQF level		EQF level
<b>England, Wales &amp; Northern Ireland</b>	<b>QCF-level</b>				
<i>General Certificate of Secondary Education</i> in 6 subjects with grades D to G or 3 to 1	1	2	<a href="#">VMBO-T</a> diploma	2	2
<i>General Certificate of Secondary Education</i> in 6 subjects with grades A* to C or 9 to 4	1	2	At least a <a href="#">VMBO-T</a> diploma	2	2
<i>BTEC Level 3 Diploma</i>	3	3	<a href="#">MBO</a> diploma (qualification level 3)	3	3
<i>BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma (180 credits)</i>	3	4	<a href="#">MBO</a> diploma (qualification level 4)	4	4
<i>Access to HE Diploma</i>	3	4	<a href="#">MBO</a> diploma (qualification level 4), <a href="#">HAVO</a> or <a href="#">VWO</a> diploma	4/4+	4
<i>General Certificate of Secondary Education</i> in 4 subjects with grades A to C or 9 to 4 + <i>General Certificate of Education</i> with 2 subjects on advanced subsidiary level (in 6 different subjects)	3	4	<a href="#">HAVO</a> diploma	4	4

## Education system United Kingdom

Degree or qualification	QCF level	EQF level	Dutch equivalent	NLQF level	EQF level
<i>General Certificate of Secondary Education</i> in 3 subjects with grades A* to C or 9 to 4 + <i>General Certificate of Education</i> with 3 subjects on advanced level (in 6 different subjects)	3	4	<a href="#">VWO</a> diploma	4+	4
<i>Higher National Certificate (HNC)/ Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)</i>	4	5	2 years of <a href="#">HBO</a>	5	5
<i>Higher National Diploma (HND)/ Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE)</i>	5	5	3 years of <a href="#">HBO</a>	5	5
<i>Honours Bachelor degree</i> (3 or 4 years)	6	6	<a href="#">HBO</a> or <a href="#">WO</a> bachelor's degree	6	6
<i>Master of Science/ Master of Arts</i> (1 or 2 years)	7	7	<a href="#">HBO</a> or <a href="#">WO</a> master's degree	7	7
<i>Master of Philosophy</i> (2 years)	7	7	<a href="#">WO</a> master's degree (research master)	7	7
<b>Scottish qualifications</b>	<b>SCQF level</b>	<b>EQF level</b>	<b>Dutch equivalent</b>	<b>NLQF level</b>	<b>EQF level</b>
<i>Scottish Qualifications Certificate met 4 Highers</i>	6	4	<a href="#">HAVO</a> diploma	4	4
<i>Scottish Qualifications Certificate met 2 Advanced Highers</i> (plus 4 Highers)	7	4	<a href="#">VWO</a> diploma	4+	4
<i>Honours Bachelor degree</i>	10	6	<a href="#">HBO</a> or <a href="#">WO</a> bachelor's degree	6	6

## Education system United Kingdom

Scottish qualifications	SCQF level	EQF level	Dutch equivalent	NLQF level	EQF level
<i>Master of Arts (Honours) degree</i> (4 old universities)	11	6	<a href="#">HBO</a> or <a href="#">WO</a> bachelor's degree	6	6
<i>Master of Science/ Master of Arts degree</i> (the other universities)	11	7	<a href="#">HBO</a> or <a href="#">WO</a> master's degree	7	7

## NB

- The information provided in the table is a general recommendation from which no rights may be derived.
- QCF = British Qualifications Framework. SCQF = Scottish Qualifications Framework. NLQF = Dutch Qualifications Framework. EQF = European Qualifications Framework.
- The EQF/[NLQF level](#) is not so much a reflection of study load or content; rather, it is an indication of a person's knowledge and skills after having completed a certain programme of study.
- Information about Dutch equivalent qualifications can be found on our website: [the Dutch education system](#).
- [The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market \(SBB\)](#), evaluates statements on foreign qualifications and training at VMBO and MBO level. The evaluation may vary if SBB evaluates the diploma for admission to VET schools or the labour market in the Netherlands.

## ■ Introduction

**The United Kingdom is a group of islands that includes Great Britain (England, Wales, Scotland) and Northern Ireland.**

### **Form of government**

The United Kingdom is a parliamentary monarchy, and Queen Elizabeth II is its head of state. She is also the head of state of a number of small overseas territories and several countries that used to be part of the British Empire, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

### **Education**

In England, the Department for Education is responsible for education. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, responsibility for education has been delegated to the respective local Departments for Education.

Legislation on education comprises various Education Acts. For example, the universities derive their powers from a Royal Charter or Act of Parliament. While private education institutions are not formally chartered by the government, they can have their degree programmes validated or accredited by recognised universities or accreditation bodies.

Some general characteristics:

- Compulsory education: from age 5 to 16 (18 in England).
- Language of instruction: English.
- School year: from August to May.
- Academic year: from September to July.

## ■ England, Wales and Northern Ireland

### Primary education

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, primary education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 11. There are privately funded schools and publicly funded schools.

### Secondary education

Junior secondary education lasts for 5 years and is compulsory for students aged 11 to 16. To conclude this phase, they can sit exams for their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

### General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)

The students themselves select their examination subjects, and also decide how many subjects they want to take exams in. This explains the considerable differences in the number of examination subjects among students, with a middle range between 5 and 10 subjects. Schools express the exam results in letter grades:

- A\* to G (A\* is a higher grade than A);
- A\*, A, B and C are the higher satisfactory grades;
- D to G are the lower satisfactory grades.

### Adaptations in England

In 2015 the GCSEs in England were changed, both in terms of the level they represent (which has risen slightly) and in organisational terms. For example, in September 2015 the GCSEs acquired a linear structure, with exams being held at the end of the programme (after 2 years) rather than mid-term. The assessment system was also adapted:

- A\* to G were replaced by figures: 9 to 1, with 9 being the highest grade (see also [Assessment systems](#)).  
NB These '9-1' exams were first taken for English language, English Literature and maths in 2017. They will be set for the other subjects in phases over 2018 and 2019.

The first GCSE exams under the new approach were administered in 2017. Several subjects have been cancelled and will be removed from the list of examination subjects effective September 2018. The government website provides more [information](#) about the new GCSE subjects and more [information](#) about the GCSEs that are no longer available.

**Please note:** these changes do not apply to Wales and Northern Ireland.



In terms of level, the *General Certificate of Secondary Education* in 6 subjects with grades A\* to C or 9 to 4 (QCF level 1/EQF level 2) is comparable to at least a [VMBO-T](#) diploma. For a description of QCF levels (entry level & levels 1 to 8), see [What different qualification levels mean](#).

In terms of level, the *General Certificate of Secondary Education* in 6 subjects with grades D to G or 3 to 1 ([QCF level](#) 1/EQF level 2) is comparable to a [VMBO-T](#) diploma.

### **General Certificate of Education (GCE)**

Post-GCSE options include pre-university education or further education (secondary vocational education).

Pre-university education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

- Duration: 2 years (upper secondary) for advanced levels (A levels).
- Content: the students themselves select their examination subjects, and also decide how many subjects they want to take exams in. Many opt for 3 A levels, as most universities require a GCE with 3 A levels for admission, combined with at least 3 GCSEs.
- Diploma: General Certificate of Education, advanced level (the GCE A levels).

The GCE spans a total duration of 13 years:

- 6 years of primary education;
- 5 years for the GCSE;
- 2 years for the GCE.

As an alternative to the A levels, students may opt to attain advanced subsidiary (AS levels) of the GCE. AS levels involve approximately half the study load compared with A levels. In addition, AS exams are at a lower level than A level exams.

### **Adapted GCE in England**

In England, GCE exams were modified effective 2015. Universities were given a greater say in the content of these exams. AS levels were separated from the A levels and no longer count towards the A level result. Students now take exams:

- after 1 year of study for AS levels;
- after 2 years of study for A levels.

The assessment system for GCEs has remained unchanged:

- A-E for AS levels;
- A\*-E for A levels.

The first new-style AS level and A level exams were held in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Several subjects have been cancelled and will be removed from the list of exam subjects effective September 2018.

**Please note:** these changes do not apply to Wales and Northern Ireland.

### Examining boards

There are various regional examining boards that hold GCSE and GCE exams. Many of those boards have merged over the years. Below is a list of some well-known examining boards:

- AQA
- Pearson
- OCR
- WJEC (Wales)
- CEA (Northern Ireland)

In addition, there is a board that focuses entirely on international education: University of Cambridge International Examinations. It offers international variants of British qualifications such as:

- the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE);
- the Cambridge O level;
- Cambridge International AS and A levels.

In terms of level, these qualifications are comparable to the regular GCSEs, AS levels and A levels. The changes to the GCSEs and GCEs do not apply to the qualifications offered by University of Cambridge International Examinations.

In terms of level, the *General Certificate of Secondary Education* in 4 subjects with grades A\* to C or 9 to 4 plus a *General Certificate of Education* in 2 other subjects at AS level ([QCF level 3](#)/EQF level 4) is comparable to a [HAVO](#) diploma.

In terms of level, the *General Certificate of Secondary Education* in 3 subjects with grades A\* to C or 9 to 4 plus a *General Certificate of Education* in 3 other subjects at AS level ([QCF level 3](#)/EQF level 4) is comparable to a [VWO](#) diploma.

### **Cambridge Pre-U**

University of Cambridge International Examinations offer the Cambridge Pre-U as an alternative to the GCE A levels in the United Kingdom. This qualification, available since 2008, was developed in collaboration with several other universities.

- Duration: 2 years.
- Content: a choice of 27 Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subjects. Exams are held after 2 years of study. The students themselves select the subjects, and decide how many subjects, they want to take exams in. Many opt for 3 A levels, as most universities require a GCE with 3 A levels for admission, combined with at least 3 GCSEs.
- Diploma: students are granted the Cambridge Pre-U Diploma if they pass 4 components, including 3 Principal Subjects and the Global Perspectives and Research (GPR) course. Students will obtain a Cambridge International Pre-U Certificate for each additional subject that they pass.  
NB Cambridge International also offer 1-year Cambridge Pre-U Short Courses in modern languages, mathematics, further mathematics and global perspectives. Students can take a Short Course in the first or second year as an incentive to expand their subject cluster.

Alternatively, they can combine a number of Principal Subjects and GCE A levels. Also note that several British universities accept Global Perspectives and Research (GPR) as an alternative to A level qualifications.

### **Secondary vocational education**

In the United Kingdom, secondary vocational education is usually known as further education. It is considered to be separate from secondary education and not to be part of higher education either. The term 'further education' covers both vocationally oriented education and hybrid forms of general secondary and vocational education.

Well-known diplomas in vocational education are the BTEC Level 3 Diploma (previously known as the National Certificate) and the BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma (previously known as the National Diploma).

- Duration: in most cases 2 years (part-time for the Diploma; full-time for the (National) Extended Diploma).
- Content: depends on specialisation, e.g. business, IT or health; (National) Extended Diploma courses usually involve 18 units; students in Diploma programmes need to pass fewer units.
- Admission: in principle, in the United Kingdom both diplomas provide access to higher education and the labour market.
- Diploma: the BTEC Level 3 Diploma and the BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma. The diplomas are awarded by national examination body Edexcel (formerly the BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council)).

In terms of level, the *BTEC Level 3 Diploma* ([OCF level 3](#)/EQF level 4) is comparable to an [MBO](#) diploma (qualification level 3).

In terms of level, the *BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma* ([OCF level 3](#)/EQF level 4) is comparable to an [MBO](#) diploma (qualification level 4).

## ■ Admission to higher education

In most cases, admission to university education is granted on the basis of GCSE A levels and GCEs. Prospective first-year students are required to submit an application to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), a central application and placement body, one year prior to the envisaged admission date.

### **Admission based on A level qualifications**

After accepting a candidate, UCAS forwards the candidate's application request to universities selected by UCAS. Several months before the A level exams, the candidate receives a conditional offer from these universities granting admission to a specific degree programme on condition that the candidate achieves the examination results specified in the offer.

Admission via UCAS:

- The general minimum requirement is 2 GCE A levels + 3 GCSEs in 5 different subjects.

The universities also formulate a number of requirements of their own (depending on the degree programme and available capacity):

- These course requirements place heavier demands on the applicant than the minimum requirement: 3 GCE A levels (+ 3 GCSEs) for most degree programmes.

NB Several British universities will also accept 2 supplementary AS levels as an alternative to the third A level, provided that the AS levels are in other subjects than the A levels.

### **Admission based on BTEC Level 3**

Alternatively, students may be admitted based on vocationally oriented 'further education'. In that case, the institution will require:

- either a BTEC Level 3 Diploma or a BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma (180 credits);

- specific examination results, e.g. an average score of at least 60% or a distinction for specific components.

NB Candidates with an Extended Diploma may be granted admission to related study programmes on a case-by-case basis, but not all British universities will accept them.

### Access to HE Diploma

Access to HE (higher education) is a set of special programmes for students who want to study for a university degree but do not meet the formal admission requirements. A range of further education colleges in England and Wales offer more than 1100 different Access programmes in total, covering a wide spectrum of subjects.

- Duration: 1 year full-time or 2 years (or more) part-time. The programmes are also available in distance learning or evening course formats.
- Admission requirement: normally speaking 1 or more GCSE subjects (A-C), usually English and/or maths and/or science; sometimes students have to pass an admission test.
- Content: mostly vocationally oriented subjects preparing students for university education in the relevant programme; students need 60 credits/units to obtain the diploma.
- Diploma: Access to HE Diploma (+ name of programme), e.g. Access to HE Diploma (Health Science).

Access to HE programmes are recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which also safeguards their quality.

In terms of level, the *Access to HE Diploma* ([OCF level 3](#)/EQF level 4) is comparable to an [MBO](#) diploma (qualification level 4), a [HAVO](#) diploma or a [VWO](#) diploma, depending on the programme and the level of prior education.

## ■ Higher education

Higher education in the United Kingdom is offered by the following institutions:

- universities;
- non-university institutions (such as colleges, institutes, schools and academies).

All these institutions may provide both research-oriented and higher professional education. In other words, the United Kingdom does not have a binary system with institutions exclusively providing either research-oriented education or professional education. For example, some education institutions offer engineering both in research-oriented and in more professionally oriented bachelor's programmes.

### Degree & non-degree programmes

Since programmes can be both research-oriented and professionally oriented, their profile is a more relevant distinguishing criterion:

- Degree programmes lead up to a degree (bachelor's, master's or doctor's degree).
- Non-degree programmes lead up to a different type of qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma.

### Credits ECTS & CATS

Some British universities express study loads in ECTS (European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System) credits. They also apply their own credits system: CATS (the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme).

- ECTS assumes that students obtain 60 credits per year;
- CATS is based on 120 credits per year.

In their course catalogues and subject lists, British universities often refer to CATS as well as ECTS. At those universities, bachelor's degree programmes (with a duration of 3 or sometimes 4 years) offer 60 ECTS per year (120 CATS), but master's students obtain 90 ECTS (180 CATS) per year. This is because British universities do not present a 1-year master's programme as a single academic year, but rather as a 12-month calendar year that qualifies for more than 60 ECTS.

## ■ University education

University education in Britain comprises two phases:

- the undergraduate programme;
- the postgraduate programme.

An undergraduate programme follows secondary education and is completed with a first degree. In nearly all cases this is a bachelor's degree, although exceptionally (for historic reasons) this may also be a master's degree.

A postgraduate programme builds on the knowledge and skills acquired in the undergraduate phase and is completed with one of the following qualifications:

- higher degree
- postgraduate diploma
- certificate

A higher degree is a master's or doctor's degree (or, very rarely, a bachelor's degree which is known by that name for historical reasons but in fact is a higher degree).

## Undergraduate programmes

With very few exceptions, undergraduate programmes are honours programmes at bachelor's level.

- Duration: mostly 3 years, but there are 4-year undergraduate programmes, such as the so-called sandwich programmes with an extra year in which students obtain work experience (through a work placement). NB Medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry and architecture have a duration of 5 to 6 years.
  - Study load: 120 credits per year, i.e. 360 credits for 3 years of study.
  - Content: presentations and essays, participation in working groups, modular exams per subject. The student's presentations throughout the programme count towards the final result (continuous assessment); final examinations that cover the material dealt with over the course of an entire academic year have become rare.
- Diploma: a bachelor's degree with honours + name of degree programme.

Bachelor's degrees are traditionally awarded in two separate domains:

- science, which covers all the natural sciences and engineering subjects;
- arts, which covers all other degree programmes.

However, a large number of variants have been added, such as:

- BCom (Bachelor of Commerce);
- BEd (Bachelor of Education);
- BEng (Bachelor of Engineering);
- LLB (Bachelor of Law) and dozens of other names.

Students who are unable or unwilling to complete the full 3-year bachelor's programme qualify for an exit award or intermediate award after completing the first or second year. After completing the first year (120 credits), these students obtain:

- a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE).

After completing the second year (240 credits), they obtain:

- the Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE).

In terms of level, the *Certificate of Higher Education* ([QCF level 4](#) / EQF level 5) is comparable to 2 years of higher professional education ([HBO](#)).

In terms of level, the *Diploma of Higher Education* ([QCF level 5](#) / EQF level 5) is comparable to 3 years of higher professional education ([HBO](#)).

And after completing 60 credits in the third year (and at least 300 credits in total) students qualify for:

- an Ordinary Bachelor degree (if they did not meet the requirements associated with the honours programme).

Institutions may award a bachelor's degree as an:

- honours degree;
- ordinary degree (also known as a pass degree).

An honours degree marks the completion of an honours programme. These are bachelor's degree programmes that involve a higher study load and more exams than ordinary programmes, within the same duration (3 or 4 years). Only honours programmes provide access to master's degree programmes. Students who hold an Ordinary Bachelor degree will not be able to continue their studies at postgraduate level.

In this context, therefore, the term 'honours' does not refer to any particular graduation distinction, but signifies that students have attended an honours programme.

British universities use a classification system to indicate a student's actual performance, with classes based on the average results achieved:

- first class, 70% and above;
- upper second class, 60-70%, or second class division 1 (2:1 for short);
- lower second class, 50-60%, or second class division 2 (2:2 for short);
- third class, 40-50%.

NB In the British system, classes are associated with Bachelor (Honours) degrees only, and are not used for Bachelor (Ordinary) degrees and Master's degrees.

In terms of level, the *Bachelor (Honours) degree* ([QCF level 6](#)/EQF level 6) following a 3 or 4-year programme is comparable to a [HBO](#) or [WO](#) bachelor's degree, depending on the nature of the programme.

### **Postgraduate programmes**

Master's degree programmes at British universities have always been postgraduate programmes, i.e. programmes that students attend after completing their first degree. There are 2 types of master's degrees: the 'ordinary' Master and the Master of Philosophy (MPhil).



- Duration: mostly 1 year.<sup>1</sup>, and 2 years for the Master of Philosophy.
- Study load: 180 credits for 12 months of study.
- Content: depends on the type of programme; see the explanation below.
- Admission: as a standard requirement, students must hold a good honours degree, i.e. a Bachelor (Honours) degree with first-class or upper second-class (2:1) results. Universities can impose supplementary requirements, but they may also accept students with qualifications below the standard requirement, such as a lower second-class degree or even an ordinary degree.
- Diplomas: Master of Philosophy (MPhil.) or a qualification from common master's degree programmes such as Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc), Master of Engineering (MEng), Master of Physics (MPhys), Master of Chemistry (MChem), Master of Mathematics (MMath), Master of Pharmacy (MPharm).

Students who are unable or unwilling to complete the full master's programme qualify for an exit award or intermediate award after obtaining part of the required number of credits.

After doing 60 credits, these students will obtain:

- a Postgraduate Certificate (PGCE).

After doing 120 credits they will obtain:

- the Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip).

The ordinary master's degree programme also distinguishes between 2 types:

- master by instruction, based on attending a curriculum;
- master by research, based on research and a thesis.

So, while these programmes are different in nature they are equivalent in terms of academic level. They usually last 1 year (a 12-month calendar year, rather than an academic year), but some programmes have a longer duration, occasionally up to 2 years. Both are completed with a master's degree whose title indicates the programme concerned (as with bachelor's degrees).

The Master of Arts degrees conferred by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge are an exception. Students can obtain these degrees at least 2 years after obtaining a Bachelor of Arts (Hons), i.e. without any further studies or exams after their bachelor's.

---

<sup>1</sup> Exception: there are also 'initial' master's degree programmes with a duration of 4 years that students can embark on immediately after completing their GCE A levels. In England, these 'initial' master's programmes comprise a small group of mainly technical specialisations. In this case, students 'skip' the bachelor's degree, as it were, and obtain their master's degree after 4 years of study. These programmes are known as 'integrated masters' (480 credits).

The second type, the Master of Philosophy (MPhil), is a 2-year programme largely devoted to research and involving very few classes, or none at all. The MPhil represents a higher level than a regular master's degree. Note that in this context, the term 'philosophy' does not refer to any association of the programme with the study of philosophy, but rather to its foundation in conducting research. MPhil programmes may be found in any branch of studies.

In terms of level, the *Master degree* ([OCF level 7](#)/EQF level 7) is comparable to a [HBO](#) or [WO](#) master's degree, depending on the type of study programme.

In terms of level, the *Master of Philosophy degree* ([OCF level 7](#)/EQF level 7) is comparable to a [WO](#) master's degree (a research master).

### PhD programmes

After obtaining their master's degree, students may be granted access to a PhD programme.

- Duration: 2 to 3 years.
- Content: research and a doctoral dissertation.
- Diploma: Doctor of Philosophy (PhD or DPhil for short).

In practice, in addition to a master's degree many universities also accept an Honours Bachelor (first class or upper second class) for admission to a PhD programme. In such a case, however, the PhD student would normally be required to attend supplementary classes to support his or her research project.

Professional doctorates are conferred in the medical and paramedical sectors, in health care and for programmes in the domains of architecture, theology, psychology and business.

- Duration: at least 3 years.
- Content: research and doctoral dissertation.
- Diploma: Doctor in + name of degree programme.

Examples of professional doctorates:

- Doctor of Medical Science (DMedSci)
- Doctor in Chiropractic (DChiro)
- Doctor of Social Work (DSW, DSocW)
- Doctor of Psychology (DPsych, PsyD, PsychD)
- Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)
- Doctor of Education (EdD)
- Doctor of Engineering (DEng)

- Doctorate of Social Science (DSocSci)
- Doctor of Built Environment (DBEnv)
- Doctor of Theology (ThD)
- Doctorate in Computer Science (DCompSci)

## ■ Higher professional education

Various types of education institutions in the United Kingdom offer higher professional education programmes. Students can choose to attend:

- a degree programme, for example at a university;
- a non-degree programme to obtain nationally recognised qualifications conferred by professional societies or other umbrella organisations, such as Edexcel.

### **Higher National Certificate & Higher National Diploma**

The 2 most important non-degree qualifications in higher professional education are conferred by Edexcel:

- the Higher National Certificate (HNC);
- the Higher National Diploma (HND).

Although some universities also offer these higher professional qualifications, most programmes are provided by private education institutions. In addition, these institutions may also provide their own programmes and certificates.

Higher National Certificate (HNC):

- Duration: 1 year full-time, 2 years part-time, in some cases 3 years.
- Content: in terms of level, this programme is equivalent to the first year of a bachelor's degree programme (QCF level 4). The courses tend to be practical in nature and professionally oriented. Students need 120 credits to complete the programme.
- Admission: a BTEC Level 3 Diploma or a BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma. Students who are admitted on the basis of GCE A levels and GCSEs are usually required to have 1 GCE A level plus 3 or 4 GCSEs.
- Transfer options: the HNC allows students to join the second year of either a follow-on Higher National Diploma programme or of a follow-on bachelor's degree programme.

Higher National Diploma (HND):

- Duration: 2 years full-time plus, in some cases, 1 year for a work placement (totalling 3 years) or 3 to 4 years part-time.
- Content: in terms of level, this programme is equivalent to the first and second years of a bachelor's degree programme (QCF level 5). The courses are mostly practical in nature and professionally oriented. Students need 240 credits to complete the programme.

- Admission: a BTEC Level 3 Diploma or a BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma. Students who are admitted on the basis of GCE A levels and GCSEs are usually required to have 1 GCE A level plus 3 or 4 GCSEs.
- Transfer options: the HND allows students to join the second or third years of a follow-on bachelor's degree programme.

In terms of level, the *Higher National Certificate* ([QCF level 4](#) / EQF level 5) is comparable to 2 years of higher professional education ([HBO](#)).

In terms of level, the *Higher National Certificate* ([QCF level 5](#) / EQF level 5) is comparable to 3 years of higher professional education ([HBO](#)).

The level of a Higher National Diploma (HND) is 1 year below that of a bachelor's degree. Students with an HND usually do a 1-year top-up programme to obtain their bachelor's degree. Even so, sometimes the HND only grants exemption from the first year of a bachelor's programme to which the student is admitted. Remarkably, institutions also accept the HND for admission to a master's degree programme (provided the student concerned has relevant work experience), while the actual admission requirement is a good honours degree (i.e. a first-class honours or upper second-class honours).

### Foundation degrees

In addition to the HNC and the HND, students in higher professional education may obtain a foundation degree (FD). In many cases it is the university that awards the FD while the university's partner institutions provide the actual degree programme concerned.

- Duration: 2 years full-time or 3 years part-time (240 credits).
- Content: a combination of theory and practical training. The FD usually also comprises a project and an extended work placement.
- Admission: the admission requirements vary from specific GCSEs (usually English and maths at grade 3) to 1 or 2 A levels (grade EE) or a BTEC Extended Diploma in a relevant domain.
- Diploma: Foundation degree in Arts (FdA), Foundation degree in Science (FdSc) or a Foundation degree in Engineering (FdEng).  
NB There is no classification system for FDs, as in the case of bachelor's degrees (first-class honours, second-class honours etc.). After completing the first year, students may obtain the Certificate of Higher Education by way of exit award.

The foundation degree provides access to the labour market and admission to the third year of a follow-on bachelor's degree programme (1-year top-up programme), just like the Diploma of Higher Education and the Higher National Diploma. However, the study results achieved will not count towards the honours class.

Given the huge diversity in admission requirements, there is no uniform credential evaluation system for FD programmes; they have to be weighed on a case-by-case basis.

## ■ Scotland

The Scottish education system is comparable in many ways with the education system of [England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#). The following sections describe the most important differences.

### Primary and secondary education

Scotland has had a Curriculum for Excellence for primary and secondary education since 2010.

- Primary education for 5 to 7-year-olds lasts 7 years: Primary 1-Primary 7.
- Secondary education for 12 to 18-year-olds lasts 6 years: Secondary 1-Secondary 6.

For Scottish pupils, the 11-year compulsory education period ends at age 16, once they have completed 4 years of secondary education (S4).

The entire curriculum comprises 5 levels:

- Early level: pre-school education and Primary 1 (P1);
- First level: Primary 2-Primary 4 (P2-P4);
- Second level: Primary 5-Primary 7 (P5-P7);
- Third/fourth level: Secondary 1-Secondary 3 (S1-S3);
- Senior phase: Secondary 4-Secondary 6 (S4-S6).

Mandatory subjects are health and well-being, literacy, and numeracy. However, there is no fixed curriculum. Pupils attend subjects in flexible programmes, with combinations of components from multiple subjects (e.g. topic-based learning). This means that pupils can do subjects at different levels at the same time, and complete the curriculum in their own tempo. Teachers are free to incorporate elements from the school environment into their lessons (for example, to focus on interesting individuals or locations in the area). It is also deemed important for pupils to develop certain skills, including analytical skills, communication skills and computer skills.

In the lower years of secondary education (S1-S3), pupils are offered subjects at various levels, from 1 to 5 (the National Qualifications). Launched in 2013-14, the National Qualifications come under the responsibility of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

S4 students usually take exams in Nationals 4 and 5 subjects; in S5 students take the Highers and in S6 the Advanced Highers. The Highers are required for admission to Scottish bachelor's programmes, 'initial' master's programmes (offered by the old Scottish universities) and the integrated long master's programmes. Advanced Highers may grant admission to the second year of these higher education programmes.

### Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC)

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) confers the Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC) on behalf of the government. The SQA also awards the certificates and diplomas in Scottish higher professional education.

The SQA [website](#) offers:

- a [list](#) of available subjects at the various levels;
- a [list](#) of Scottish baccalaureates;
- a [list](#) of subjects in secondary vocational education, [Skills for Work/SVQ](#).

In terms of level, the *Scottish Qualifications Certificate* (SQC) with 4 Highers (SCQF level 6/EQF level 4) is comparable to a [HAVO](#) diploma.

See also [SCQF Level Descriptors](#).

In terms of level, the *Scottish Qualifications Certificate* (SQC) with 2 Advanced Highers plus 4 Highers (SCQF level 7/EQF level 4) is comparable to a [VWO](#) diploma. See also [SCQF Level Descriptors](#).

## ■ Admission to higher education

The application procedure for admission to Scottish universities also involves [UCAS](#). Most universities demand:

- 4 Highers in 4 different disciplines with a score of A or B, often represented in a combination of letters, e.g. ABBB or AAAB;
- specific supplementary subjects (usually maths and English) at National 5 level;
- and impose stricter requirements for admission to the medicine programme: more than 4 Highers in combination with 2 Advanced Highers.

Requirements for admission to the Higher National Certificate programme:

- usually 2 Highers completed with at least a grade C; and/or
- National 5 qualifications combined with relevant Higher units.

Requirements for admission to the second year of a Scottish bachelor's programme:

- 3 Advanced Highers; or
- the [Scottish Baccalaureate](#); or
- a Higher National Certificate.

## ■ Higher education

The types of higher education institutions in Scotland are comparable to those in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For example, Scottish higher education is also divided into:

- degree programmes;
- and non-degree programmes.

Both types also have the same phases as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

- undergraduate;
- postgraduate.

However, there are 2 notable differences:

- Undergraduate programmes for an honours degree last 1 year longer than for an ordinary degree (4 years and 3 years respectively, in most cases).
- At the 4 old universities (Aberdeen, St Andrews, Edinburgh and Glasgow), Arts students (i.e. students in programmes other than engineering or science) complete their studies with a Master of Arts (Honours) degree, or MA (Hons) for short, rather than with a bachelor's degree.

NB In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the MA (Hons) qualifies as a bachelor's degree.

Scottish institutions also offer integrated long (5-year) master's programmes which in effect combine a bachelor's and a master's, although in the end only a master's degree is conferred.

In terms of level, an *Honours Bachelor* ([SCQF](#) level 10/EQF level 6) is comparable to a [HBO](#) or [WO](#) bachelor's degree, depending on the nature of the study programme.

In terms of level, an undergraduate *Master of Arts (Honours)* from one of the 4 old universities ([SCQF](#) level 11/EQF level 6) is comparable to a [HBO](#) or [WO](#) bachelor's degree, depending on the nature of the study programme.

In terms of level, a postgraduate *Master* ([SCQF](#) level 11/EQF level 7) is comparable to a [HBO](#) or [WO](#) master's degree, depending on the nature of the study programme.



## ■ Assessment systems

In the United Kingdom, education institutions use numbers or letters in their assessment of a student's performance.

### Secondary education

Two different assessment scales are used in secondary education:

- GCSE uses a scale of 9 to 1 (A\* to G before 2017/2018), with 9 (formerly A\*) being the highest level and 4 (formerly A\*, A, B and C) indicating more than satisfactory performance.
- GCE uses a scale of A\* to E, all indicating satisfactory performance (GCE introduced A\* in 2010).

New grading structure	Current grading structure
9	A*
8	
7	
6	B
5	
4	
3	D
2	
1	
U	U

Source: [Your qualification, Our regulation – GCSE, AS and A level reforms in England](#) (UK government)

### Scotland

The National 5, Highers and Advanced Highers use the assessment scale A-D.

### Higher education

The scale used in Scottish higher education runs from A to D or E. There is no national standard for awarding grades. Many Scottish universities apply the following system, with D being the lowest satisfactory score:

Grade	In percentages
A	70% and higher
B	60-69%
C	50-59%
D	40-49%

At the end of a bachelor's degree programme, all the grades obtained by a student are converted into a class as a general indication of the result achieved. However, this does not apply to master's and doctor's degrees (the 'higher degrees').

Qualification	Definition
first class	good-very good (cum laude)
upper second	very satisfactory-good
lower second	satisfactory-very satisfactory
third	fair

### Compensated pass (CP)

Subject to specific conditions, students can obtain a 'compensated pass' for a subject or module which they formally failed. Their score should not be lower than 30% and they must reach a certain average for the other results achieved (e.g. 45%). The original result for the subject or module concerned is stated on the list of marks, qualified by 'CP'.

### European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

British universities rarely use the ECTS grading scale, but prefer their own scales instead. When they do use ECTS this concerns the student's academic record. According to the common conversion formula, 2 British credit points equal 1 ECTS.

### Valuation of foreign credentials

See our [website](#) for more information about the valuation of study results achieved.

## ■ Qualification frameworks

Several different qualification frameworks are used in the British education system:

- The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) for higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (since 2001).
- The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) for Scotland.

### **Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)**

The national qualifications framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland has 8 levels in total. The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) covers the first 3 levels of the framework and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) covers levels 4-8:

- Level 1: Level 1 certificate/diploma/award, GCSE 3, 2, 1/D, E, F, G, NVQ level 1.
- Level 2: Level 2 certificate/diploma/award, GCSE 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4/A\*, A, B, C, NVQ level 2, O level (A-C).
- Level 3: A level, AS level, Access to higher education diploma, IB diploma, Level 3 certificate/diploma/award, National Certificate, National Diploma, NVQ level 3.
- Level 4: qualifications in the first year of higher education, such as the Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) and the Higher National Certificate (HNC).
- Level 5: qualifications representing 2 years of higher education, such as the Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE), the foundation degree (FD) and the Higher National Diploma (HND).
- Level 6: qualifications that represent 3 years of higher education, such as the Honours Bachelor degree and the Ordinary Bachelor degree. Level 6 also covers the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education, the Graduate Certificate and the Graduate Diploma.
- Level 7: postgraduate qualifications, including the Master's degree, the Integrated Master's degree and the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or the Postgraduate Diploma.
- Level 8: doctorate, including the PhD and the professional doctorate.

These levels comprise multiple qualifications, each with its own learning outcomes. Qualification descriptors have been defined for each level, which give an indication of the associated general learning outcomes per level. The following links provide more details about the FHEQ: [What different qualification levels mean](#) and [A brief guide to academic qualifications](#).

### **The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)**

In Scotland, all qualifications form part of a separate national framework known as the SCQF. The SCQF has 12 levels that are described in terms of knowledge, skills and degree of autonomy using so-called level descriptors.

Below is an overview of the [classification](#) of these 12 levels:

- Level 12: Doctorate
- Level 11: Masters
- Level 10: Honours Bachelors
- Level 9: Ordinary Bachelors
- Level 8: Higher National Diploma
- Level 7: Higher National Certificate and the Advanced Highers
- Level 6: Highers
- Levels 1-5: National Qualifications at levels 1-5

The professionally oriented qualifications (e.g. SVQs) are also linked to the various levels within this framework. For more information about the SCQF, visit the [SCQF website](#).

## **■ Accreditation and quality assurance**

There is no government-organised accreditation system for higher education in the United Kingdom. Accreditation bodies exist, but they do not work on behalf of the government and tend to focus on private institutions or specific types of education (such as written courses or training for professional examinations).

### **Recognised bodies**

The British government can recognise higher education institutions under formal legislation, such as a Royal Charter. Such recognised institutions (which include all British universities) are known as recognised bodies.

### **Listed bodies**

Listed bodies are a separate category of non-recognised institutions that are qualified to provide recognised degree programmes owing to their collaboration with a recognised partner institution. While listed bodies are not allowed to issue degrees themselves, they are authorised to provide the associated degree programmes. Upon completion of the programme, the students then receive the degree from the listed body's partner (the recognised body).

The website of the British government includes lists of [recognised bodies](#) and [listed bodies](#).

### Quality assurance

Responsibility for quality assurance in higher education rests with the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#), an independent body that coordinates and records the annual assessments of degree programmes. If the quality is found to be substandard, the government can decide to cut off funding.

Quality assurance in secondary education (GCSEs, AS levels, A levels and secondary vocational education qualifications) is the responsibility of the [Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation \(Ofqual\)](#). Founded in 2010, Ofqual is an independent organisation that monitors and regulates the quality standards on which the qualifications are based, and provides information about those qualifications. For a list of qualifications, see the [Ofqual register](#).

### Validation and franchising

Many British universities offer degree programmes in collaboration with a British or overseas partner institution, an arrangement known as 'collaborative provision'. Most British universities keep a list of partners and the degree programmes concerned in the collaborative provision register.

Two types of partnerships are particularly widespread:

- validation, in which the partner institution develops and provides the degree programme and the British university both awards the degree/qualification and safeguards its quality;
- franchising, in which the British university develops the degree programme and the partner institution provides it.

Both scenarios involve a partnership with a British or overseas institution. A list of marks stating 2 different names for the awarding institution and the teaching institution reflects the use of this arrangement.

See the [Quality Code for Higher Education](#), and in particular Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others, for guidelines on standards and good practices for collaboration with partner institutions. The Quality Code was drawn up by the [QAA](#).

### Authenticity

In the event of doubt, the authenticity of a diploma can be verified by the institution where it was obtained. On request, British institutions will verify whether a student actually obtained a particular diploma with them. In most cases however this does require written permission from the graduate concerned. Professional bodies and registers such as those for teachers, nurses or engineers will be able to provide information about professional qualifications.

The London School of Economics and Political Science has its own secure [database](#). Registered students are free to issue a link to their digital dossier to external parties who wish to verify the student's credentials. The dossier itself is security restricted and the information cannot be printed.

The Higher Education Degree Datacheck (HEDD) provides an alternative verification tool. An initiative of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), this paid service was set up to prevent fraud in higher education. The [HEDD website](#) offers 2 main options:

- Free service: users can check whether a particular institution is a recognised body or a listed body. In addition, they can find information about name changes and mergers (since 1990).
- Paid service: verification of British diplomas.

To verify the authenticity of Cambridge certificates, consult the [CIE Direct database](#), which is available for higher education institutions free of charge. For more information about the use of this database, read the [CIE Direct guide](#).

## ■ Bologna process

Bachelor's and master's degree programmes existed in the United Kingdom before the Bologna Process introduced them elsewhere in Europe.

For more information about the current state of affairs regarding the Bologna Process, see the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) [website](#).

## ■ International treaties

The United Kingdom signed the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997 and ratified it in 2003.

## ■ Diploma Supplement

British universities now commonly provide a list of subjects and examination results (the student's academic record) as a supplement to the diploma. However, not all universities have adopted the international Diploma Supplement (Council of Europe/Unesco). The British counterpart is the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

More information on the Diploma Supplement (DS) is available on the European Commission [website](#).

## ■ Composition of file

### Secondary education

Secondary education diplomas state the subjects that the student has passed, with the examination results. It is far from uncommon to find several different diplomas in the file, obtained at different points in time or issued by different examining boards. This is because students can sit subject-specific exams for both the GCSE and the GCE and add examination subjects by sitting additional exams each year.

### Higher education

Higher education diplomas:

- always state the name of the degree or certificate;
- do not always state the name of the study programme.

Any information about the degree programme and subjects studied that is not stated on the diploma may be found in annexes, such as the academic record, a Diploma Supplement, a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) or the UCAS code for the programme.

In the transcript of a recognised degree programme:

- 'awarding institution' features the name of the institution that granted the degree;
- 'teaching institution' features the name of the institution that taught the programme.

## ■ Overview of higher education institutions

See the website of the British government for an [overview](#) of recognised higher education institutions.

Recognised Scottish universities:

- Abertay University
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- Heriot-Watt University
- Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh
- Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
- The Open University
- The Robert Gordon University
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Dundee
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Glasgow

- University of St Andrews
- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- University of the West of Scotland

## ■ Useful links

- The [Department for Education](#) is the British government ministry that covers primary and secondary education.
- The website of the British government includes lists of [recognised bodies](#) and [listed bodies](#).
- The [Quality Assurance Agency](#) (QAA) provides information about accreditation and quality assurance in the British education system.
- Consult the [Ofqual register](#) to find qualifications in the British secondary education system.
- [UK NARIC](#), the National Recognition Information Centre, is the national office for the recognition and comparison of international qualifications.
- The [Higher Education Degree Datacheck](#) (HEDD) provides information on the status of British higher education institutions for verification purposes.
- [Verification database](#) of Cambridge International Education.

### Scotland

- The [Scottish Qualifications Authority](#) provides information about the accreditation and quality assurance of Scottish qualifications.