

The UK Higher Education System:

The United Kingdom (UK) has a long history of its higher education. Teaching in the city of Oxford is documented from 1096, making the University of Oxford the oldest university in the English speaking world. The University of Cambridge celebrated its 800th anniversary in 2009, commemorating the association of scholars who first gathered in the town in 1209. Three Scottish universities – St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen – were founded by papal bull in the 15th century and a fourth – the University of Edinburgh - was established by royal charter in 1583. A major expansion of higher education in the UK occurred in the 19th century with the awarding of royal charters to the St. David's College, Lampeter (subsequently part of the University of Wales), Durham University, King's College London, and University College London. In addition, the latter part of the century saw the foundation of medical, science and engineering colleges in England's major industrial cities, some of which eventually amalgamated to become the so-called 'redbrick' universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield. During the 1950s and 1960s, as a direct response to the demands of an expanding population and the needs of an increasingly technological economy, the British government set out to expand the higher education sector. New colleges of advanced technology were established from 1956 onwards and were awarded university status in 1966; Aston, Bath, Bradford, Brunel, City, Loughborough, Salford and Surrey all became universities in this way, with the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology going on to become a constituent part of what is now Cardiff University in 1988. A further 13 UK institutions including Hull and Leicester, both former university colleges, gained university status during these two decades and the seven new universities of East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick and York were also created.

Significant expansion followed in 1992 when, by means of the Further and Higher Education Act , the UK government granted university status to 35 former polytechnics and to a number of other institutions, principally colleges of higher and further education. Between 2001 and 2013, an additional 31 universities were created, including those resulting from the break-up of the federal University of Wales but excluding the merger of institutions already possessing the university title, and a further ten university colleges have recently had their applications for university status put forward to the Privy Council for formal approval. Collectively these universities are referred to as ‘post-92’ or ‘modern’ universities, though it should be noted that many of them have long and illustrious histories as vocational institutions.

Higher education in the UK is now provided by a diverse range of organisations. 166 institutions currently have their own degree awarding powers. The majority of these also have ‘university’ title, which is only granted to those institutions which meet certain criteria. However there is also a growing number of ‘listed bodies’ – institutions which do not have the power to award their own degrees, but may provide full courses which lead to a degree of institutions with degree awarding powers. In 2011 the UK government estimated that, in addition to degree awarding institutions, there were over 1,600 bodies, including 250 further education colleges, which currently offer some form of UK higher education provision. The remainder of this paper focuses primarily on higher education provided by the UK’s degree awarding institutions, referred to collectively as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It should also be noted that, for many purposes, higher education policy is now developed separately in each of the countries making up the UK, with the Scottish Government, Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Executive each having specific and differing responsibilities for certain parts of higher education and student policies.

Types of institution

Higher education institutions in the UK are either degree-awarding ('recognised bodies,' called universities and colleges) or non-degree awarding, but provide bridging courses for entry into a degree-awarding programme ('listed bodies'). Students should always confirm the exact nature and details of their prospective course of study with their host institution directly.

Universities and University Colleges

Not all higher education institution have right to use the title 'university', Which is regulated by law. There are two routes to securing this right:

- **Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992**, the Privy Council is responsible for approving the use of the word 'university' (including 'university college'). Prior to 2005, there was an additional requirement of research degree awarding powers.
- Institutions may also obtain approval for the use of the word 'university' in their names under the **provisions of the Companies Act 2006**.

Institutions that award taught degrees but which do not meet the numerical criteria for university title may apply to use the title 'university college', although not all choose to do so.

Other Higher Education Providers:

Higher Education Institutions:

A higher education institution (HEI) is defined as i) a university, or ii) an institution conducted by a higher education corporation, or iii) a institution designated as eligible to receive support from funds administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (aside from Further Education Colleges, which are defined below). At present, all English HEIs with the exception of the University of Buckingham and the University of Law receive support from funds administered by HEFCE and are listed here. HEFCE directly funds 128 HEIs.

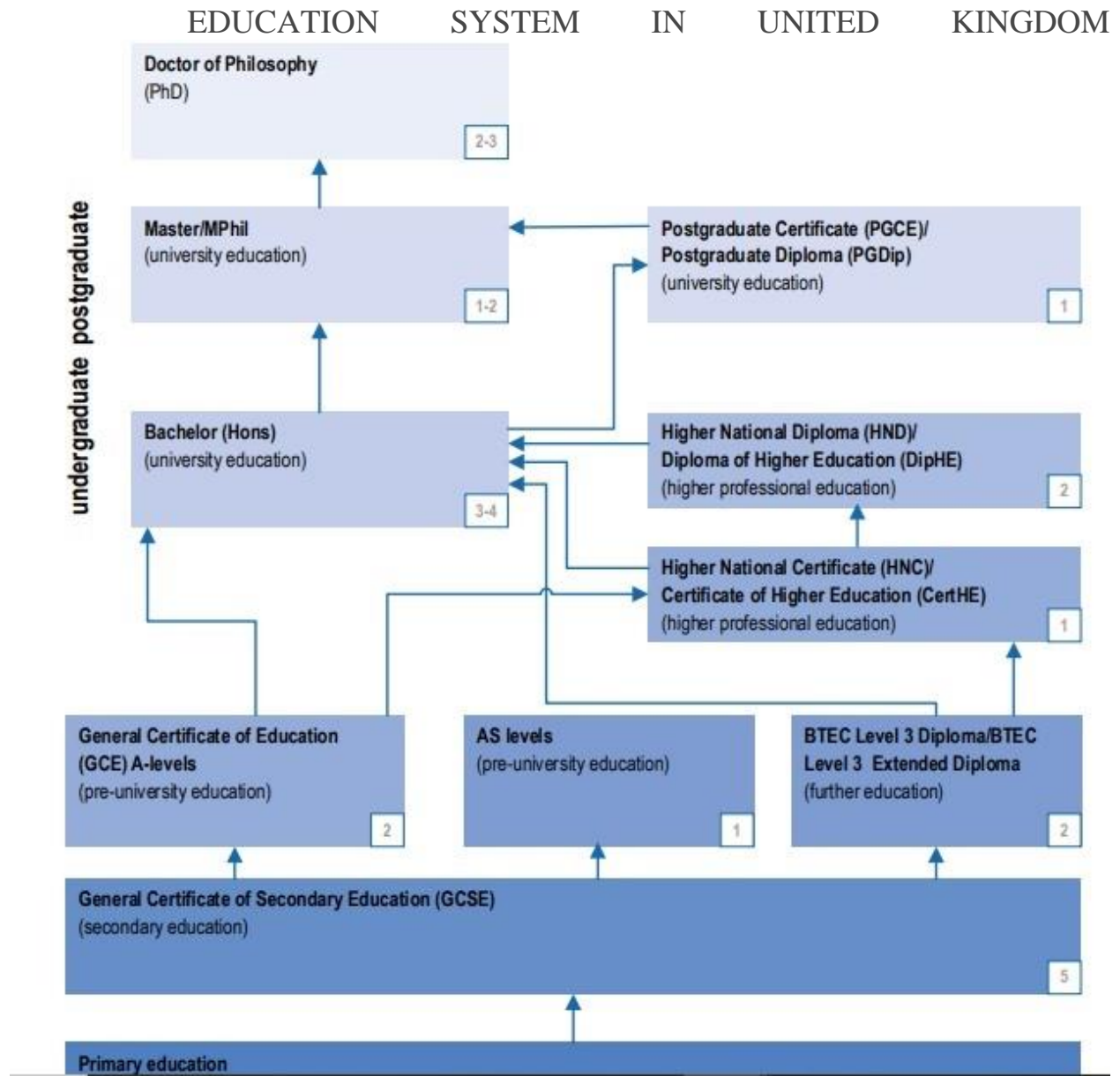
There are over 700 colleges and other institutions in the UK which do not have degree awarding powers, but which provide complete courses leading to recognised UK degrees. Courses at these institutions are validated by institutions which have degree awarding powers. These other providers of higher education programmes may use other institutional titles such as ‘college’. The use of such titles is not regulated by law.

Further Education Institutions:

Higher education programmes are also provided in over 250 further education colleges, ranging from those with fewer than 50 students to those with nearly 4000 (see the article ‘Institutions Providing Adult Education and Training’). Such programmes are normally designed and approved directly by a higher education institution with degree awarding powers, under a formal recognition arrangement. Some short-cycle programmes are awarded by a national awarding body. Higher education provision in further education institutions may either be funded directly by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), or alternatively via a franchise arrangement. A franchise arrangement, which can cover all or part of a programme, means that a student is registered at a higher education institution, which receives the funding and is responsible for quality assurance. The HEI then passes a proportion of the funding to the further education college providing the teaching.

Alternative Providers:

Higher education is also provided in an increasing number of independent private institutions, including both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, which receive no direct government funding. Also termed ‘alternative providers’, these are defined as any provider of higher education courses which: is not in direct receipt of recurrent funding from HEFCE or from equivalent bodies in the Devolved Administrations; or does not receive direct recurrent public funding (for example, from a local authority, or from the Secretary of State for Education); and is not a further education college.



Student admissions and degree structure:

Each institution makes its own decisions about entry requirements and is responsible for its own admissions procedures. The vast majority of applications to full-time undergraduate courses in the UK are made via a central coordinating agency, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) . In 2007, UCAS set up an online postgraduate application service, UKPASS, but applications for the majority of postgraduate courses are still made directly to the

university or college concerned. The majority of international students also apply directly to HEIs. First degree courses, commonly known as bachelor's degrees and usually awarded 'with honours', typically take three years to complete in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and four years at a Scottish university. Courses which include a period of practical work outside the institution normally take four years. Certain specialist courses and some vocational or professional degree courses may take longer. For example, medicine and dentistry can take up to six years (not including further specialist training) and architecture up to seven years. At postgraduate level, a taught Master's degree normally takes one year, a research Master's two years and a doctoral degree a minimum of three years. There are also a number of vocational 'sub-degree' qualifications offered in the UK, including the Higher National Diploma (HND), the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and the Diploma in Higher Education (Dip HE), which generally take one or two years to complete. Other qualifications include postgraduate certificates, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). In addition, students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland can take two-year vocational Foundation Degrees and then take a 'top-up' course to honours degree level on successful completion. Under the UK's traditional degree-classification system students are awarded First-class Honours (1st), Second-class Honours, upper division (2:1), Second-class Honours, lower division (2:2), Third class Honours (3rd), an Ordinary –degree (Pass) or a Fail, rather than the Grade Point Average (GPA) used in the USA and some other countries. However, changes to the degree classification system have been under consideration in a number of universities, with some (including Oxford Brooks) starting to implement the GPA system. Many universities also provide the new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which is intended to provide more detailed information about her/his learning and achievement and incorporates and extends the existing Record of Academic Achievement (the 'academic transcript') as well as the European Diploma Supplement.⁵ Having been trialled by 30 HEIs across the UK, it was formally launched for voluntary take-up by the rest of the HE sector in October 2012 . This is one of the key developments to emerge so far from the active engagement of UK HEIs in the ongoing work of the Bologna Process, an initiative involving some 47 countries to create a European Higher Education Area in which several aspects of higher education are being reformed and developed in order to facilitate the comparability of systems and qualifications and to enable the mobility of EU citizens across national borders.

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 for most degree programmes: 3 GCE A levels (+ 3 GCSEs) with results A*, A or B. Note: 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. Note: 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 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.

Degree awarding powers :

In the UK the power to award degrees is regulated by law and the national authorities only recognise institutions which have been granted degree-awarding powers by a royal charter or by Act of Parliament. Currently, the **Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992** empower the Privy Council to grant HEIs powers to award their own degrees. Additionally, since 2008 in England and 2010 in Wales, further education institutions have been able to apply to the Privy Council for powers to award their own 'Foundation Degrees' (typically vocationally focused and equivalent to two thirds of a full honours degree).

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 ETCS

University education :

University education in Britain comprises 2 phases:

- The undergraduate 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.

- The postgraduate programme: 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). Note: 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 2 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). 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).

Honours 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%. Note: in the British system, classes are associated with Bachelor (Honours) degrees only, and are not used for Bachelor (Ordinary) degrees and Master's degrees.

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.

- Duration: mostly 1 year (Master), and 2 years for the Master of Philosophy.
- Study load: 180 credits for 12 months of study (Master).
- Content: depends on the type of programme; see the explanation below.
- **Admission requirements:** 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). Master programmes There are 5 types of master's degree programmes:

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

Master of Arts;

- Integrated masters;
- Master of Philosophy.

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).

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.

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.

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

Qualification frameworks:

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

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

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).** 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.**

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. This

government register of the Department of Education is no longer maintained and is being replaced by the Office for Students (OfS) Register.

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.

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.

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.

[Department for Education - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

- The website of the British government includes lists of recognised bodies and listed bodies. These list are being replaced by the Office for Students Register.

<https://www.gov.uk/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised>

- The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) provides information about accreditation and quality assurance in the British education system.

<https://www.eqar.eu/register/agencies/agency/?id=39>

- Consult the Ofqual register to find qualifications in the British secondary education system.

<https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/>

- UK NARIC, the National Recognition Information Centre, is the national office for the recognition and comparison of international qualifications.

<https://www.naric.org.uk/Qualifications/Default.aspx>

- The Higher Education Degree Datacheck (HEDD) provides information on the status of British higher education institutions for verification purposes. •

<https://hedd.ac.uk/>

Verification database of Cambridge International Education.

<https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/exam-administration/results/verification-of-students-results/>

References:

- Higher Education Funding Council for England website – <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/>
- The UK Council for International Student Affairs – <http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/>
- The Guardian (UK)'s site on Higher Education- <http://www.theguardian.com/education/higher-education>
- The British Council's page on Higher Education – <http://www.britishcouncil.org/higher-education>
- University and colleges admission services- <https://www.ucas.com/>