

Self-certification

Compatibility of FHEQ with FQ-EHEA

Advisory Group report

**Verification of the compatibility of  
*The framework for higher education qualifications  
in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) with  
the Framework for Qualifications of the  
European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)***

**Report of the FHEQ Self-certification Advisory Group**

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# 1 Summary

This is a report to the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DELNI), on the self-certification of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) 2008*, against the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)*. The report is published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and verifies the compatibility of the FHEQ with the FQ-EHEA, employing the criteria and procedures agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process.

This document is intended to fulfil a number of functions in addition to the simple assertion of self-certification and notification to other countries that a Bologna-compatible national qualifications framework is in place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI). It also aims to explain and fully document the compatibility of the FHEQ with the FQ-EHEA. It is designed for both domestic and overseas readers. It seeks to clarify areas where potential confusions and misunderstanding may exist and act as a comprehensive reference document. The FHEQ is most appropriately viewed as an evolving entity that will be subject to further review and adjustment over time. The process of review and development does not stop with self-certification.

In March 2007 QAA was asked to take forward the task of self-certification by Bill Rammell MP, then Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education for England. In November 2007 Judith Cole from the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills in the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) requested that QAA also undertake the self-certification of the WAG's higher education qualifications framework: the *Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales (CQFW)*. (For further information, please see Appendix F.)

The FHEQ was first published in 2001 and is developed and maintained by QAA, which published the revised second edition in August 2008.<sup>1</sup> The FHEQ describes the achievement represented by higher education qualifications and applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates)<sup>2</sup> granted by higher education providers in EWNI in the exercise of their degree awarding powers. The second edition of the FHEQ is a product of a long-term review and feedback process spanning from March 2003 to June 2008 (details of this chronology can be found in Appendix I). It was developed with the assistance of a formal Advisory Group (for membership, see Appendix C) and incorporated feedback gained from extensive discussion and consultation throughout 2007-2008 with the EWNI higher education sectors and their stakeholders.

The current self-certification process was greatly assisted by the detailed revision procedures for the FHEQ, which fully took account of the Bologna developments. Similarly, the development and publication of the new *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*<sup>3</sup> in 2008 took into account Bologna developments, specifically those associated with the European Credit Transfer

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<sup>1</sup> The FHEQ 2008 can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08)

<sup>2</sup> In the UK honorary degrees are awarded to individuals to mark their outstanding contributions to a specific field or to society in general without them having to undertake residence, study or exams. Higher doctorates are awarded in recognition of a substantial body of original research undertaken over the course of many years. Typically the candidate will submit a collection of work which has been previously published in a peer-refereed context.

<sup>3</sup> The *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* document can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit)

and Accumulation Systems (ECTS). Furthermore, the FHEQ relates to the parallel *Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (Scottish FQHE), which successfully completed its self-certification process in October 2006.<sup>4</sup> The EWNI and Scottish qualifications frameworks share many core purposes and features.

To aid the full understanding of the FHEQ and the process of self-certification, this report provides contextual information about higher education in the UK, the FHEQ, the role and responsibilities of QAA and the relationship between the FHEQ and credit arrangements. The widespread use of credit in EWNI and the relationship between it and ECTS are detailed in section 2.7, section 3.3 and table 3 of this report.

The process of self-certification was facilitated by an Advisory Group (for membership, see Appendix B). Following the consultative process the Advisory Group's verification report was agreed by QAA's Executive Committee. Ministers were then informed at DIUS, WAG and DELNI. The Advisory Group concluded that:

- Foundation Degrees (for example, FdA, FdSc) and by extension the Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE) and Higher National Diplomas (HND) are intermediate qualifications within the first cycle of the overarching FQ-EHEA
- bachelor's degrees (non-honours degrees) are compatible with the first cycle descriptor within the overarching FQ-EHEA. Holders of this degree can gain access (but not necessarily immediate access) to programmes within the second cycle
- bachelor's degrees with honours (for example, BA/BSc Hons) are compatible with completion of the first cycle within the overarching FQ-EHEA
- master's degrees (for example, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc) and by extension integrated master's degrees (for example, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm) are compatible with completion of the second cycle within the overarching FQ-EHEA
- doctoral degrees (for example, PhD/DPhil [including new-route PhD], EdD, DBA, DClinPsy) are compatible with completion of the third cycle within the overarching FQ-EHEA.

The outcomes of the self-certification process are summarised in table 1 on page 4. This table and notes are reproduced with minor additions and adaptations from pages 10 and 11 of the original FHEQ 2008 document.

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<sup>4</sup> *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (Scottish FQHE) can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF) and the *Compatibility of the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland with the European Higher Education Area* document is available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/SelfCertification2007.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/SelfCertification2007.asp)

**Table 1: Examples of the typical higher education qualifications at each level of the FHEQ and the corresponding cycle of the FQ-EHEA**

Within each level, the various qualifications involve different volumes of learning and hence differences in the range of intended learning outcomes. Levels 1-3 are not included as they precede higher education.

In adopting the overarching FQ-EHEA ministers agreed that the framework would include, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications (Bergen, 2005). The short cycle referred to below is that developed by the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) as part of the Dublin descriptors for qualifications within or linked to the first cycle. A feature of the FHEQ is that it encourages the development of flexible learning paths through the provision of a variety of qualifications that, *inter alia*, facilitate lifelong learning. A range of qualifications exist at some levels in the FHEQ. In the context of the FQ-EHEA cycles, some of these are regarded as intermediate qualifications, as although they are at the level of the relevant cycle they are not **end of cycle** qualifications; these are denoted by the boxes shaded grey.

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ level*	Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle
Doctoral degrees (eg, PhD/DPhil (including new-route PhD), EdD, DBA, DClinPsy)**	8	Third cycle ( <b>end of cycle</b> ) qualifications
Master's degrees (eg, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	Second cycle ( <b>end of cycle</b> ) qualifications
Integrated master's degrees*** (eg, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm)		
Postgraduate diplomas		
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)****		
Postgraduate certificates		
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg, BA/BSc Hons)	6	First cycle ( <b>end of cycle</b> ) qualifications
Bachelor's degrees		
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)****		
Graduate diplomas		
Graduate certificates		
Foundation Degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc)	5	Short cycle ( <b>within or linked to the first cycle</b> ) qualifications
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		
Higher National Diplomas (HND)		
Higher National Certificates (HNC)*****	4	
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)		

Source: FHEQ 2008, page 10

## Notes to table 1:

- \* Formerly, in the 2001 edition of the FHEQ, the levels were identified as Certificate (C), Intermediate (I), Honours (H), Master's (M) and Doctoral (D) level.
- \*\* Professional doctorate programmes include some taught elements in addition to the research dissertation. Practice varies but typically professional doctorates include postgraduate study equivalent to a minimum of three full-time calendar years with level 7 study representing no more than one-third of this.
- \*\*\* Integrated master's degree programmes typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7. Thus study at bachelor's level is integrated with study at master's level and the programmes are designed to meet the level 6 and level 7 qualification descriptors in full.
- \*\*\*\* In April 2005, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, the Standing Conference of Principals, Universities UK (UUK) and QAA issued a joint statement on the PGCE qualification title. The full statement may be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/PGCEstatement.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/PGCEstatement.asp)
- \*\*\*\*\* Higher National Certificates (HNCs) are positioned at level 4, to reflect typical practice among higher education awarding bodies that award the HNC under licence from Edexcel.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Self-certification

The FQ-EHEA was adopted by ministers responsible for higher education in Bergen, in May 2005. It is designed to provide an overarching mechanism to relate national qualifications frameworks and help improve comparability, international transparency, recognition and mobility. It sets the parameters within which the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) develop their national qualifications frameworks. This means that national frameworks will have much in common, but will not be identical. The EHEA framework:

- describes the 'outer limits' within which national frameworks should be situated
- allows for diversity within those limits
- ensures compatibility between national frameworks
- presents a 'common face' for higher education in Europe, which is important in a global context.<sup>5</sup>

This self-certification report is consistent with the recommendations on self-certification of the *Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks report, 2005*<sup>6</sup> and the *Report from Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2007*.<sup>7</sup>

This self-certification report sets out the EWNl response in relation to the following criteria and procedures for verification elaborated by the Bologna Working Groups:

- the national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education
- there is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework
- the national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS-compatible credits
- the procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent
- the national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process
- the national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements
- the responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published.

Procedures for verifying that national frameworks are compatible with the EHEA framework were set out in the report to ministers in Bergen as follows:

- the competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework

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<sup>5</sup> Source, the official Bologna Process website: [www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/overarching.asp](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/overarching.asp)

<sup>6</sup> The report can be accessed at: [www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The report can be accessed at: [www.dfes.gov.uk/londonbologna/uploads/documents/WGQF-report-final2.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/londonbologna/uploads/documents/WGQF-report-final2.pdf)

- the self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process
- the self-certification process shall involve international experts
- the self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out
- the ENIC [European Network of Information Centres] and NARIC [National Academic Recognition Information Centre] networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process<sup>8</sup>
- the completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework.

## 2.2 Higher education in the UK

The higher education system in the UK is complex and has a number of characteristics not generally encountered elsewhere in Europe. First, there are actually four systems, one for each of the administrative jurisdictions of the UK: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The similarities amongst the four are greater than their differences, so it is possible to speak of a 'UK higher education system', but the differences are nonetheless marked and are becoming more so. In particular, Scotland, which has always had a separate education system, has adopted a distinctive approach to the organisation of education at all levels and, for example, uses a credit and qualifications framework covering all levels of activity from secondary to higher education. Wales is moving in a similar direction, while in England, although there is also evolution, the separate nature of higher education from other levels remains more accentuated. Relationships between UK higher education systems have become more complex since the 1997 devolved system of government with legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There are two separate higher education qualifications frameworks: one for Scotland - *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland, 2001 (FQHE)*;<sup>9</sup> and one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland - the 2008 revised *Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*.<sup>10</sup>

Within the UK there are also frameworks of school and vocational qualifications managed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA),<sup>11</sup> and an integrated overarching credit and qualifications framework in Scotland - *The Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF)*<sup>12</sup> (of which the FQHE is a constituent part) and *The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*<sup>13</sup> (of which the FHEQ is a constituent part).

There are over 169 higher education institutions (HEIs) across the UK creating a large and diverse higher education sector. Student numbers at individual universities and colleges range from 500 to over 150,000 and there is diversity in mission as well as in delivery modes. UK

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<sup>8</sup> The official Bologna website contains a section that lists those countries that have completed the self-certification process and provides access to the full reports:  
[www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/national.asp#C](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/national.asp#C)

<sup>9</sup> This report can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/2001/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/2001/default.asp)

<sup>10</sup> This report can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08)

<sup>11</sup> Further information about QCA can be accessed at: [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)

<sup>12</sup> Further information about the SCQF can be accessed at: [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)

<sup>13</sup> Further information about the CQFW can be accessed at: [www.elwa.ac.uk/elwaweb/elwa.aspx?pageid=1612](http://www.elwa.ac.uk/elwaweb/elwa.aspx?pageid=1612)  
(will migrate to [www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk))

HEIs are self-governing and are not owned or run by the Government. Their level of autonomy is high compared to similar institutions in many other countries. All have an independent legal identity; some have a Royal Charter, some are higher education corporations, while others have been created through an Act of Parliament.

Institutions that have been granted legal powers by the Privy Council to award UK degrees are designated as 'recognised bodies'. Other institutions, which do not have the power to award their own degrees but may through partnership arrangements deliver full programmes that lead to a degree that is awarded by a 'recognised body', are designated as 'listed bodies'. The formal lists of recognised and listed bodies and links to the appropriate Statutory Instruments are maintained by DIUS and are available on its website, which also contains information about bogus degrees and a useful list of FAQs concerning the recognition of programmes and institutions.<sup>14</sup> Some institutions without degree awarding powers are designated by the funding councils as higher education institutions and are funded accordingly. In addition, a considerable volume of publicly-funded higher education provision is delivered in further education colleges as part of governments' widening participation agendas.

The total number of institutions in the UK higher education sector as at August 2008 is given in the table below, which includes the breakdown for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

**Table 2: Breakdown of universities and higher education institutions in the UK (excluding foreign HEIs operating in the UK)<sup>15</sup>**

	<b>Universities</b> (NB The constituent institutions of the University of Wales and University of London are counted as one university respectively)	<b>Higher education institutions (HEIs)</b>
<b>England</b>	90	133
<b>Scotland</b>	14	20
<b>Wales</b>	3	12
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	2	4
<b>United Kingdom (total)</b>	109	169

### **2.3 Higher education providers and qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI)**

All universities, colleges and other providers with legal UK degree awarding powers (DAPs) award their own degrees and qualifications, that is, higher education qualifications are not awarded by the state. This autonomy means that higher education providers are responsible for managing the academic standards and quality of their awards.

The power to award degrees is regulated by law in the UK. It is an offence for an institution to purport to award, or to offer to award a UK degree, unless it is authorised to do so. Since 1992,

<sup>14</sup> Information can be accessed at: [www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees)

<sup>15</sup> Source: Adapted from the UUK website at: [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/UKHESector/FAQs/Pages/About-HE-Sector-and-Universities.aspx#Q2](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/UKHESector/FAQs/Pages/About-HE-Sector-and-Universities.aspx#Q2) with the data originally sourced from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and DELNI (August 2008).

the power to award degrees has been granted by the Privy Council, a senior UK Government committee, which acts on the advice of the responsible authorities in the four administrative jurisdictions. In turn the relevant governments' education departments seek QAA's views on applications.

There are three types of degree covered by UK legislation: taught degrees (that is, degrees awarded following a programme of instruction, not a programme of research); research degrees; and Foundation Degrees. Each of these three categories has its own set of (government) criteria against which applications for awarding powers are assessed by QAA. Research DAPs cannot be granted unless the applicant already has taught DAPs. Other types of higher education award, such as certificates and diplomas, are not generally protected by law and may be granted by any organisation.

The use of the title 'university' or use of 'university' in an institution's name is also regulated by law and institutions have to meet certain criteria for these purposes. These are assessed by QAA on behalf of the Privy Council which is responsible, under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, for approving the use of the word 'university' (including 'university college') in the title of a higher education institution. In England and Wales the title of university may be granted to any institution that has taught DAPs and at least 4,000 full-time equivalent students, of whom at least 3,000 are registered on degree (including Foundation Degree) level courses. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, applicant institutions for university title are, in addition, required to hold research DAPs and to cover a range of subject areas.

All UK universities undertake research and teaching, although the mission, focus and balance of activities vary - some concentrate primarily on teaching while others are more research intensive.

The range of higher education qualifications awarded in EwNI is described in the FHEQ. Devolution has not and will not fundamentally alter the relationship between the qualifications within these countries. One of the main purposes of the FHEQ is to facilitate a consistent use of qualifications titles across the higher education sector. Section 5 of the FHEQ provides detailed information and guidance to higher education providers on the naming of qualifications to ensure they are not misleading.

## **2.4 Admissions and progression**

EwNI HEIs cater for mass participation, with applicants who come from a wide range of backgrounds and demonstrate their potential to succeed in a variety of ways.

In the UK admission requirements for entry to higher education study or programmes leading to a higher education qualification are set by the autonomous higher education providers, which offer a range of entry routes and/or credit transfer into their programmes.

As autonomous institutions their individual admissions policies address the making of complex judgements about the relative potential of each individual within a diverse population of applicants. Institutions have discretion (part of their autonomy) regarding the admission of students. Each institution will have quality assured admissions policies that are consistent with its particular mission and that are fair, lawful and have regard to the reasonable expectations of prospective students. Admission to higher education is influenced by the precepts and explanations contained in the *QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*, September 2006, and *Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, September 2004.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This document can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section1](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section1)

The most common qualification for entry to higher education is the General Certificate of Education at 'advanced' level (A-level) - including the 'advanced supplementary' qualification. A-levels exist for a large number of subject disciplines. Students in their 13th year of school or at a college of further education normally take up to three or four subjects studied in considerable depth, involving coursework and final examinations. Other qualifications for entry are the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE), the QAA-approved Access to Higher Education Diploma or qualifications located in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)/Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)<sup>17</sup> level 3, or the equivalent according to the CQFW, including the Welsh Baccalaureate and qualifications in the SCQF. Part-time and mature students may enter with these qualifications, or alternatively with evidence of equivalent prior learning and experience. Institutions will admit students whom they believe to have the potential to complete their programmes successfully, and set their requirements for entry to particular programmes accordingly.

The Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) has developed a comprehensive tariff points system used to report achievement for entry to higher education in a numerical format.<sup>18</sup> The UCAS tariff points score system was introduced for entry to higher education from September 2002 and many undergraduate programmes now make conditional offers based on the tariff. It establishes agreed comparability between different types of qualifications and provides comparisons between applicants with different types and volumes of achievement. It covers a wide range of qualifications, but it is for each institution to determine what would be accepted for entry purposes. Tariff points are awarded to various qualifications, for example, GCE A2s (A-levels), AVCEs, BTEC National Awards, Certificates, Diplomas, CACHE Diploma, Irish and Scottish qualifications, and so on. Applicants are then asked to achieve a tariff point score in order to fulfill the conditions of their offer.

It is a feature of the Bologna cycles that first cycle degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention,<sup>19</sup> to second cycle programmes; and second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies.<sup>20</sup> A major purpose of the FHEQ is to assist in the identification of progression routes. The FHEQ, therefore, similarly acknowledges that the successful completion of a qualification at one level provides access to a next level programme. It is important to stress that in the FHEQ and FQ-EHEA access is not the same as admission. Following the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the term 'access' implies the assessment of applicants' qualifications, with a view to determining whether they meet the **minimum** requirements for pursuing studies in a given higher education programme. Access is distinct from admission, which concerns individuals' actual acceptance on to the higher education programme concerned.

In many other European countries, as in EwNI, a range of higher education qualifications is available to students who have undertaken a programme of study within the FQ-EHEA first cycle, but which do not represent the full extent of achievement for this cycle. These intermediate qualifications are referred to in Bologna documents as higher education 'short cycle' (within the first cycle) awards. Such awards may prepare students for employment while also providing preparation for, and access to, studies towards completion of the first cycle.

An important feature of higher education in EwNI is the promotion of lifelong learning, social inclusion, wider participation, employability and partnership working with business,

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<sup>17</sup> The QCF is currently under development and will in time replace the NQF.

<sup>18</sup> The UCAS tariff can be accessed at: [www.ucas.ac.uk/students/ucas\\_tariff](http://www.ucas.ac.uk/students/ucas_tariff)

<sup>19</sup> *The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region, 1997*, can be accessed at: [www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Recognition/LRC\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Recognition/LRC_en.asp)

<sup>20</sup> These access principles were established by ministers in the Berlin Communiqué, 2003, *Realising the European Higher Education Area*.

community organisations and among higher education providers nationally and internationally. Consequently, UK higher education providers are increasingly recognising the significant knowledge, skills and understanding that can be developed as a result of learning opportunities found at work, both paid and unpaid, and through individual activities and interests. In exercising this function, EWNI higher education providers consider how learning that has taken place in a range of contexts may be assessed and formally recognised. This can be for the purpose of admission to a programme of studies, or for exemption from part of a programme of studies.

The recognition of prior learning for admission and exemption is a significant element of UK higher education's flexible approach towards admissions, and in 2004 QAA produced *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*.<sup>21</sup> These guidelines support higher education providers, as they develop and reflect upon their accreditation of prior learning (APL) policies and procedures, while maintaining and enhancing their quality and standards.

The process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement is commonly known across the higher education sector as 'accreditation'. The term 'accreditation of prior learning' is used in the *Guidelines* to encapsulate the range of activity and approaches used formally to acknowledge and establish publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place.<sup>22</sup> Such learning may have been recognised previously by an education provider and is described as 'prior certificated learning', or it may have been achieved by reflecting upon experiences outside the formal education and training systems and is described as 'prior experiential learning'.

Decisions regarding APL are a matter of academic judgement by autonomous higher education providers who are responsible for the development of their own policies and procedures. This includes any limits that may be imposed on the proportion of learning that can be recognised.

## **2.5 Quality assurance of higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI)**

QAA was established in 1997. It is an independent body funded by subscriptions from UK universities and higher education colleges, and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies in the UK. It was established to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education and is governed by a Board (for details of QAA Board membership, see Appendix A), which has overall responsibility for its conduct and strategic direction.

As previously mentioned, HEIs are independent, autonomous organisations, with their own legal identities and powers, both academic and managerial. They are not owned by the state, although most are dependent to a greater or lesser extent on state financing, and are free to offer such programmes and awards as they wish, subject to the status of their awarding powers. Each higher education awarding body is responsible for ensuring that appropriate standards are being achieved and a good quality education is being offered. QAA judges how well universities and colleges fulfil their responsibilities and the effectiveness of their processes for doing so. Higher education awarding bodies are responsible for the academic standards and quality of their own degrees and other awards through the process of **internal** quality assurance. This involves, inter alia, each higher education provider continually assessing its systems and programmes to ensure that they are fit for purpose. This is done on an annual

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<sup>21</sup> These can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/guidance.asp)

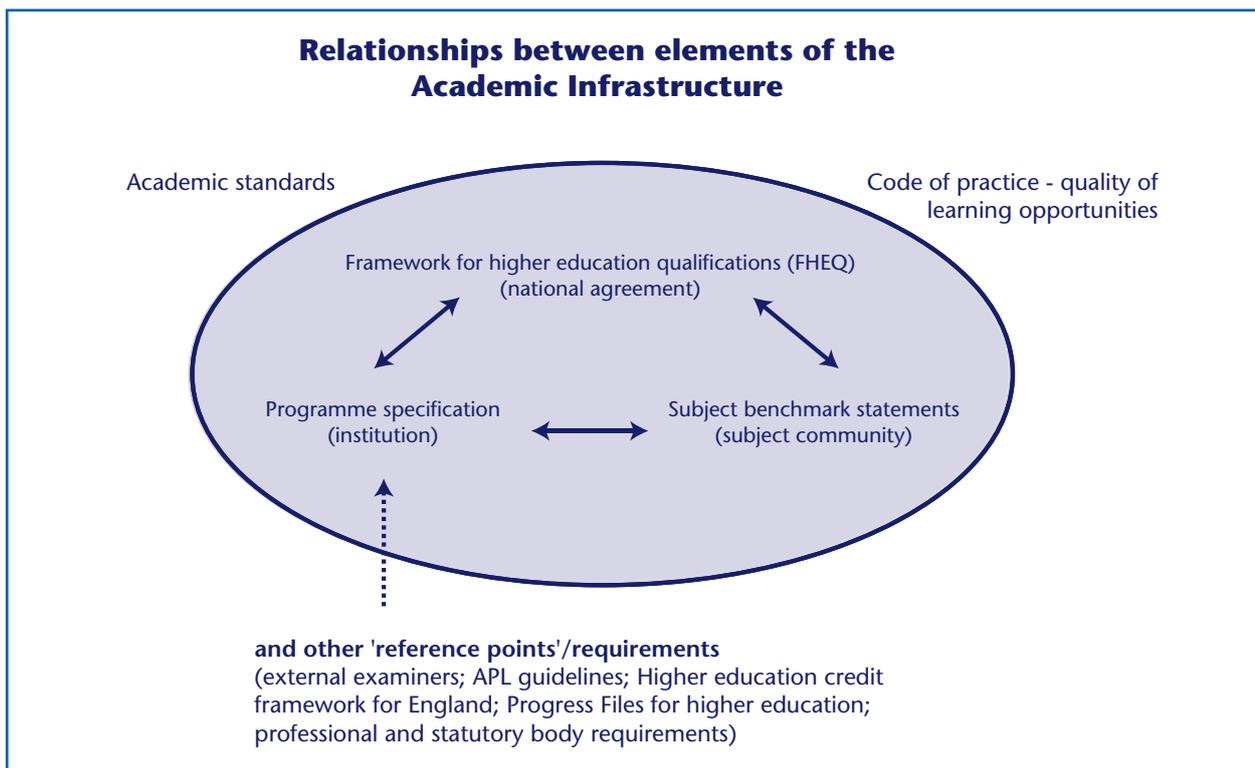
<sup>22</sup> In many parts of Europe, accreditation of prior learning (APL) is commonly known as recognition of prior learning (RPL).

basis (by considering reports of external experts, course team monitoring reports and student feedback mechanisms) and via longer term periodic reviews (involving internal and external peers). The views of students and recent graduates are taken into account. QAA carries out **external** quality assurance by judging how reliably the universities and colleges fulfil their responsibilities. There is in consequence no national system of accreditation.

In the UK quality assurance is facilitated by the 'Academic Infrastructure'. This is a set of interrelated reference points that provide a means of describing and maintaining academic standards. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA has worked with the higher education sector to establish the following parts of the Academic Infrastructure: frameworks for higher education qualifications, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*.<sup>23</sup> All elements of the Academic Infrastructure are regularly reviewed and revised to maintain their currency and fitness for purpose. For example, most components are now in their second edition and QAA holds extensive evaluation data and information on their implementation.<sup>24</sup>

The following diagram illustrates the relationship between the elements of the Academic Infrastructure:

**Diagram 1: The relationship between elements of the Academic Infrastructure**



Source: QAA

Higher education awarding bodies use the Academic Infrastructure in their management of the standards and quality of their programmes and awards. QAA uses the Academic Infrastructure as a reference point when reviewing the effectiveness of institutions' management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The three

<sup>23</sup> Further information on the Academic Infrastructure can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure)

<sup>24</sup> All QAA reviews and reports can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews)

central elements illustrated in the diagram (FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications) represent different aspects of the Academic Infrastructure that interact, linking the nationally agreed framework, subject communities and institutions.

Institutions develop programme specifications, consisting of definitive publicly available information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements of each programme of study. These are both developed and approved within the context of the FHEQ and the appropriate subject benchmark statement. Benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities. Institutional staff also take account of additional reference points (APL guidelines, higher education credit guidelines, Progress Files and any professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements).

Internal and external quality assurance processes are augmented by the use of external examiners who are part of the formal processes to quality assure the assessment of programmes and the award of qualifications. External examiners independently scrutinise the assessment outcomes of programmes of study. Within a given discipline they assist in the comparison of academic standards across modules and programmes, ensure comparability of standards between institutions, verify that the standards set are appropriate for the awards, and ensure that the assessment processes are sound and fairly operated. External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining nationally comparable standards within autonomous higher education providers.

In addition, the extensive *QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* provides guidance on maintaining quality and standards for higher education providers. The Academic Infrastructure collectively establishes external reference points to inform programme development, approval, monitoring and review.

QAA has the responsibility to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications, and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. This is achieved by providing the reference points that help to define clear and explicit standards and by reviewing institutions' management of academic standards and quality. This approach is fully consistent with the 2005 *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (more details are contained in section 3.5 of this report).

In England and Northern Ireland, HEIs are reviewed through an institutional audit. In Wales, there is a process known as institutional review. In both cases, the aim is to ensure that institutions are providing higher education of an acceptable quality, awarding higher education qualifications of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in the FHEQ and exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner. Additionally, the opportunity is taken to recommend ways in which improvements might be made to the management of standards and quality.

QAA also conducts audits of collaborative arrangements between UK HEIs and other organisations in the UK and overseas that lead to the award of qualifications from those UK higher education awarding bodies. QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*<sup>25</sup> provides the reference point for this activity.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This can be accessed at [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2)

<sup>26</sup> Full details and reports of EwNI institutional audits, collaborative provision audits, specific reviews (EwNI and UK-wide) and overseas reviews can be downloaded from: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews)

In this context, the FHEQ promotes a clearer understanding of the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles, such as bachelor's degree with honours, or master's degree. The FHEQ forms an integral part of quality assurance in higher education. Higher education providers use it in planning, delivering and reviewing their programmes and awards, while external quality assurance procedures focus directly on how effectively institutions make use of the FHEQ.

QAA auditors and reviewers (drawn from peers)<sup>27</sup> use the FHEQ as a reference point when auditing or reviewing the establishment and management of academic standards by higher education providers. In particular, they look at how institutions align the academic standards of their awards with the levels referred to in the FHEQ. They also ascertain whether institutions have a means of ensuring that awards and qualifications are of an academic standard at least consistent with the standards referred to in the FHEQ.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Qualifications Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) and the Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment in Northern Ireland (CCEA) established the *National Qualifications Framework* (NQF) and have developed its replacement: the *Qualifications and Credit Framework* (QCF).<sup>28</sup> These authorities regulate a number of professional, statutory and other awarding bodies (see below) that control vocational education and training qualifications and school education.

Finally, a further dimension to quality assurance concerns PSRBs, which have an important role in accrediting certain qualifications. PSRBs are used to introduce an element of peer judgement and self-regulation into government-supervised regulation. PSRB accreditation is an umbrella term used to describe the approval of a higher education provider's programmes and modules for the purpose of PSRB recognition. In many cases this accreditation may lead to a right to practise a profession, achieve exemption from professional examinations and/or membership of a professional body. The process of PSRB accreditation provides an important guarantee that standards are appropriate and that the institution's curriculum is relevant. PSRBs use the FHEQ to help them define their professional programmes and place them at the appropriate level.

## **2.6 The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), 2008**

A national framework for higher education qualifications was proposed originally in the Dearing report, produced by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997.<sup>29</sup> The FHEQ was first published in 2001. It established that higher education providers should be able to demonstrate that all students commencing programmes after the start of the 2003-2004 academic year would gain, on successful completion, qualifications that were awarded in accordance with the FHEQ. It is based on the notion that public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications.

The FHEQ is not a statutory framework. It is the product of extensive stakeholder consultation and consensus building. When the initial FHEQ was published in 2001, higher education providers were given a period of time in which to align their programmes and awards to the

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<sup>27</sup> Peers are independent experts drawn from the academic (other institutions) and professional community (practitioners) who impartially scrutinise higher education providers.

<sup>28</sup> QCF is to be at the heart of a major reform of the vocational qualifications system designed to simplify and make it more inclusive, more relevant to the needs of employers and more flexible for learners.

<sup>29</sup> *Higher Education in the learning society* (the Dearing report), 1997, can be accessed at: [www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe)

standards indicated in the FHEQ. All providers were expected to be able to demonstrate that students commencing programmes as from the 2003-4 academic year would gain qualifications that were awarded in accordance with the FHEQ. After this point QAA institutional audit and review teams examined the means by which higher education providers ensured that their academic awards were consistent with the FHEQ and recorded their findings in published reports. QAA published a document in 2006: *Outcomes from institutional audit - the framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*<sup>30</sup> (as part of a series of papers called *Outcomes from institutional audit*), which analysed the ways in which HEIs had used the FHEQ.

Following normal QAA practice, the FHEQ itself was reviewed and revised leading to its second edition, published in 2008 (see Appendix I for the chronology of implementation, review and revision of FHEQ). Further evidence of the nature and extent of this implementation can be found in the extensive A-Z listings on QAA's website. These listings contain reports on reviews of HEIs and on higher education programmes, including those offered in further education colleges, since 2002.<sup>31</sup>

The FHEQ is based on the concept that qualifications are awarded for the demonstrated achievement of learning outcomes and attainment, rather than the length or content of study. It provides the basis for a shared understanding, for higher education and its key stakeholders, of the link between standards and qualification levels. It provides a series of generic qualification descriptors that summarise the levels of knowledge and understanding and the types of abilities that holders of different qualifications are likely to have.

The main purposes of the FHEQ are to:

- provide important points of reference for setting and assessing academic standards to higher education providers and their external examiners
- assist in the identification of potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning
- promote a shared and common understanding of the expectations associated with typical qualifications by facilitating a consistent use of qualifications titles across the higher education sector.

As a result, the FHEQ enables higher education providers to communicate to employers, schools, parents, current and prospective students, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), and other stakeholders, the achievements and attributes represented by the typical higher education qualification titles.

In the UK each stage within any framework of qualifications - be it school, vocational, further or higher education - is commonly referred to as a 'level'. In practice, most such levels represent bands of qualifications that share similar expectations of attainment. To convey the relative position of levels of achievement and/or qualifications, it is convenient to number them. The FHEQ has five levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. These are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher education in the *National Qualifications Framework (NQF)* and the *Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)*. The levels of the FHEQ, with examples of typical qualifications at each level, are represented in table 1 on page 4.

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<sup>30</sup> This *Outcomes...* paper can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/fheq.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/fheq.asp)

<sup>31</sup> QAA's review reports can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews)

However, there is a need to avoid confusion with the numbering of levels in the various frameworks of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The authorities responsible for the maintenance of credit and qualification frameworks of the UK and the Republic of Ireland have produced a guide to comparing the main qualifications offered in each country: *Qualifications can cross boundaries*.<sup>32</sup> This guide enables comparisons to be drawn between qualifications and their levels, rather than direct equivalences. It shows how you can compare qualifications across national boundaries.

Each level is illustrated by, and each award determined by reference to, a qualification descriptor. The qualification descriptors of the FHEQ reflect five distinct levels of intellectual achievement associated with the typical higher education qualifications awarded by higher education providers in EWNl in accordance with their degree awarding powers.

The qualifications descriptors exemplify the nature and characteristics of the main qualification at each level, and comparison demonstrates the nature and characteristics of change between qualifications at different levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications.

The FHEQ qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed, and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part is of particular relevance to higher education providers in designing, approving and reviewing academic programmes. They need to be satisfied that for any programme the curriculum and assessments provide all students with the opportunity to achieve, and to demonstrate achievement of, the intended outcomes.

The second part is a statement of the wider abilities that the typical student could be expected to have developed. It will be of assistance to higher education providers during discussions with employers and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of the qualification.

Each descriptor sets out the outcomes for the typical qualification at each level - for levels 6, 7 and 8 this is usually a degree.

Typically, programmes leading to higher education qualifications, particularly those taken over a number of years, include learning that is progressively more challenging. For the award of a higher education qualification at a particular level, the outcomes of this learning must reflect, in a holistic way, the qualification descriptor for that level.

Not all higher education qualifications will meet the qualification descriptors in full. For example, table 1 (on page 4) lists the **typical** higher education qualifications at each level but not all the qualifications at each level will meet all the expectations of the qualification descriptor. The qualifications are differentiated by the volume of learning and this in turn leads to variation in the range of intended learning outcomes.

A complementary approach, used by some other frameworks within the UK, is to use 'credit' level descriptors to determine the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy associated with a particular level of learning and achievement (see sections 2.7 and 3.3).

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<sup>32</sup> *Qualifications can cross boundaries* can be accessed at: [www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/glacier/qual/compare](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/glacier/qual/compare)

## 2.7 The FHEQ and credit

Credit is a means, used by the majority of UK HEIs for a substantial number of years, of quantifying the amount or volume and complexity of work associated with learning outcomes. The principles underpinning the use of credit are the same across the UK. The credit level descriptors used across EWNl are generally derived from those developed through the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) project.<sup>33</sup> These NICATS level descriptors have since been retitled the EWNl credit level descriptors.

Both Scotland and Wales have integrated credit and qualifications frameworks. In Scotland this is the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)*.<sup>34</sup> In Wales this is the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*.<sup>35</sup> The CQFW is a fully integrated meta-framework encompassing all post-14 education, learning and training. There are three levels corresponding broadly with the current system of conventional undergraduate study (levels 4, 5 and 6) and two post-graduate levels (levels 7 and 8). There is broad agreement in the Welsh higher education sector on the total number of credits required for the award of the main Higher Education qualifications. The CQFW endorses the recommendations of the *Credit and Higher Education Qualification* publication produced from the EWNl Credit Bodies HEIs' consultation in 2001.

In England and Northern Ireland, various large consortia have shared approaches to credit practices for many years, using a common 'language' to support curriculum development within and between institutions, thus supporting consistency in approach to standards. Northern Ireland does not have a formal credit framework in place but its institutions do follow similar practices to those in the rest of the UK. An EWNl Credit Forum was established in 2003, and comprised regional credit bodies and consortia. In 2008 this was renamed to become the UK Credit Forum, following the inclusion in its membership of representatives of SCQF. The UK Credit Forum acts as a forum for the sharing of information and good practice on all matters related to credit, and it offers comments and advice on UK and European proposals that are put out to consultation.

In the UK, credit is seen to serve a number of different functions. It is fundamentally a tool for describing the comparability of learning achieved in terms of its volume and intellectual demand. It can help higher education providers to design modules/programmes in different disciplines and contexts, which are similar in volume and in intellectual demand. It also provides a basis for recognising learning achieved in other institutions or elsewhere. Credit values give information about the amount of learning and academic demands of that learning. Furthermore, credit frameworks can:

- acknowledge, codify and provide clarity about the relative demand and level of diverse higher education and professional development qualifications
- provide a 'route map' showing progression routes to enable students to navigate personal learning pathways more easily
- facilitate the accreditation and accumulation of small amounts of measurable learning that can build confidence and encourage further learning
- enable students to interrupt their studies and/or transfer more easily between and within institutions, while maintaining a verified record of achievements (credit transcript) to date

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<sup>33</sup> Further information on NICATS can be accessed at: [www.nicats.ac.uk/mainindex.html](http://www.nicats.ac.uk/mainindex.html)

<sup>34</sup> Further information on the SCQF can be accessed at: [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)

<sup>35</sup> Further information on the CQFW can be accessed at:  
<http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/creditqualificationsframework/?lang=en>

- provide a common language supporting curriculum development within and between HEIs
- support the achievement of consistent student workloads across programmes within different disciplines
- encourage and facilitate partnerships between institutions
- facilitate students' entry to an international education arena where national credit frameworks can be recognised as a passport to mobility.

In 2007 the Credit Issues Development Group (CIDG) was established to carry out the detailed work of refining the credit arrangements for England and to develop appropriate guidance. In 2008 it produced the guidance document: *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on higher education credit arrangements in England*, following consultation with the sector and other bodies. Those institutions in England that elect to use credit are encouraged to use this credit framework in conjunction with the FHEQ in order to promote consistency of approach across the sector in the use of credit.

The English higher education credit framework shares the same principles as those used by institutions in Wales and Northern Ireland. It has been designed to be complementary to the implementation of the FHEQ and it therefore uses the same levels and refers to the main qualification examples in the FHEQ. Most, but not all, HEIs in England use credit-based systems in the design and management of curricula and the standards of qualifications. The English higher education credit framework is therefore not part of external quality assurance procedures, but where a higher education provider uses credit, the credit framework is an appropriate point of reference.

The Joint Forum for Higher Levels, which includes QAA, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and a range of stakeholders, has developed a set of *Overarching principles and shared operational criteria for a common approach to credit*.<sup>36</sup> These are designed to help those working at the interface between the vocational education and training sector and the higher education sector to develop a common understanding of how credit is used in the two sectors. A number of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and Skills Pathfinders have begun to use them in support of their work.<sup>37</sup>

Many EWNi institutions use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), particularly to help the mutual recognition of periods of study abroad and assist student mobility. ECTS is based on the principle that 60 ECTS credits are equivalent to the learning outcomes and associated workload of a typical full-time academic year of formal learning. In everyday practice, two UK credits are equivalent to one ECTS credit. More details on this are contained in section 3.3 of this report.

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<sup>36</sup> Further information on these overarching principles can be accessed at: [www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_8154.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_8154.aspx)

<sup>37</sup> Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) focus on progression into and through vocational education. They aim to create new learning opportunities; forge agreement across institutions on how qualifications are valued; and produce publicity to help people understand how they can progress through the system. Higher Level Skills pathfinder projects explore and embed shared strategies for higher education provision and workforce development skills between higher education providers and employers.

## 2.8 The relationship between the FHEQ and European developments

Within the FQ-EHEA, the term 'cycle' is used to describe the three sequential levels identified by the Bologna Process (first cycle, second cycle and third cycle), within which all European higher education qualifications are located. In broad terms, the first cycle corresponds to undergraduate awards (typically bachelor's degrees), and the second cycle and third cycles to postgraduate awards (typically master's degrees and doctoral degrees, respectively).

Similar to the FHEQ, the FQ-EHEA has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle, known as the 'Dublin descriptors'.<sup>38</sup> These illustrate the typical abilities and achievements associated with qualifications that signify the completion of each cycle. The Dublin descriptors are appended to the FHEQ document for higher education providers to use as an additional reference point.

In many other European countries, as in EWNI, a range of higher education qualifications is available to students who have undertaken a programme of study within the FQ-EHEA first cycle, but which do not represent the full extent of achievement for this cycle. These intermediate qualifications are referred to as higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) awards. Such awards may prepare students for employment while also providing preparation for, and access to, studies for completion of the first cycle.

The FHEQ also contains a range of intermediate qualifications within the second cycle, which do not represent the full achievement for this cycle.

Increasingly, higher education institutions, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The frameworks for higher education qualifications throughout the UK are designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration, and thus align with FQ-EHEA. As such, the labels used to distinguish the different levels of the FQ-EHEA (short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) have also been incorporated into the FHEQ. Questions on the relationship of the FHEQ to FQ-EHEA were extensively explored in the consultation that led to the second edition of the FHEQ.

A further aspect of the European education is the development of *The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF), agreed by the European Parliament in April 2008.<sup>39</sup> The EQF is designed to act as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. The EQF encourages countries to relate (reference) their qualifications systems or frameworks to the EQF by 2010 and to ensure that all new qualifications issued from 2012 carry a reference to the appropriate EQF level.

At the core of the EQF are eight reference levels describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do, that is, learning outcomes. Levels of national qualifications will be placed at one of the central reference levels, ranging from basic (level 1) to advanced (level 8). It is intended to enable much easier comparison between national qualifications and should also mean that people do not have to repeat learning if they move to another country. Levels 5-8 of the EQF have been designed in such a way that they correspond respectively, but are not identical with, the Dublin short cycle descriptor for intermediate qualifications and the three FQ-EHEA cycles.

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<sup>38</sup> The Dublin descriptors were originally developed by the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI). Further information about the JQI can be accessed at: [www.jointquality.org](http://www.jointquality.org)

<sup>39</sup> *The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF) can be accessed at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/eqf08\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/eqf08_en.pdf)

### **3 Criteria for self-certifying that the national qualifications framework (FHEQ) is compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)**

#### **3.1 Criterion 1: The national framework for higher education qualifications and the body or bodies responsible for its development are designated by the national ministry with responsibility for higher education**

QAA has responsibility to safeguard the student and wider public interest in the maintenance of standards of academic awards and the quality of higher education. Following the 1997 publication of *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, a report by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing,<sup>40</sup> the UK Government responded to the various recommendations with *Higher Education for the 21st Century*.<sup>41</sup> The Government's response included the following endorsement:

...the recommendation that there should be a national higher education qualifications framework, along with the recommendation of the Garrick report that there should be a parallel framework for Scotland. It will look to the responsible bodies in the higher education sector to agree the detail of the framework, taking the Committee's outline as the starting point. The Quality Assurance Agency, in consultation with interested bodies, will have a central role. The major elements of the framework should be in place by the year 2000.<sup>42</sup>

The Government response also noted that:

The higher education representative bodies have agreed that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) remit will extend to quality assurance, the provision of public information to students, parents and employers, verifying standards and maintaining the qualifications framework. The Agency intends to develop codes of practice on a number of aspects of quality and standards.<sup>43</sup>

QAA is the body responsible for the development and maintenance of the FHEQ and this is recognised by the relevant ministries, devolved authorities and other stakeholders. Bill Rammell, then Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education wrote to Peter Williams (Chief Executive of QAA) on 20 March 2007, asking QAA to take forward the task of self-certification of the FHEQ against the overarching Bologna framework FQ-EHEA. This letter is reproduced in Appendix F. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DELNI) also supported QAA in leading this initiative. In November 2007 Judith Cole from the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, WAG, requested that QAA also undertake the self-certification of WAG's higher education qualifications framework: *The Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales* (CQFW). This letter is also reproduced in Appendix F.

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<sup>40</sup> *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (the Dearing report), 1997, can be accessed at: [www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe)

<sup>41</sup> The Government's response to the Dearing report, *Higher Education for the 21st Century*, 1998, can be accessed at: [www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/dearing](http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/dearing)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 4, section 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 4, section 2.

### **3.2 Criterion 2: There is a clear and demonstrable link between the qualifications in the national framework and the cycle qualification descriptors of the European framework**

The first edition of the FHEQ was published in 2001, prior to the development and finalisation of the JQI Dublin descriptors adopted to describe the three EHEA cycles. The developers of the JQI Dublin descriptors acknowledged that their work was influenced by several existing national qualifications frameworks including the 2001 FHEQ.<sup>44</sup> This chronology has resulted in the added benefit that the 2008 periodic revision of the FHEQ could take full account of subsequent Bologna reforms. As a result, the Advisory Group that facilitated the second edition of the FHEQ focused on the links between the EwNI qualification descriptors and the FQ-EHEA descriptors. This is detailed in the FHEQ document itself.

An important dimension to any correlation between FHEQ and FQ-EHEA lies in the progression and access that each FHEQ qualification provides and how this relates to the Bologna cycles. This topic has been previously introduced in section 2.4 of this report, where the distinction between 'access' and 'admission' was highlighted. Admission and progression decisions are made in the UK by autonomous higher education providers. There is no automatic or legal right of admission from one award to another.<sup>45</sup> However, there is consistent and common practice across the sector and it is possible to summarise the access that each FHEQ qualification provides to the next level, although individual applicants are considered on their merits and do not necessarily follow the sequence below.

The FHEQ (Bologna first cycle) bachelor's degree with honours gives the right to apply for the FHEQ (Bologna second cycle) master's degrees, which in turn give the right to apply for the FHEQ (Bologna third cycle) doctoral degrees. Entry to:

- Foundation Degrees (for example, FdA, FdSc) is by a range of routes detailed in section 2.4 of this report. Foundation Degrees aim to contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning by encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher-level qualification and are designed specifically for students with no formal qualifications. Admission is focused on the likelihood of each person's ability to complete the programme successfully and to derive benefit from the programme. This usually involves an interview and a process of evaluation of relevant prior learning
- bachelor's degree (for example, BA/BSc) is by a range of routes detailed in section 2.4 of this report
- bachelor's degrees with honours (for example, BA/BSc Hons) is by a range of routes detailed in section 2.4 of this report
- master's degrees (for example, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc) is normally by holders of honours bachelor's degrees
- doctoral degrees (for example, PhD/DPhil (including new-route PhD) EdD, DBA, DCLinPsy) is normally by holders of a master's qualification.

The detailed correlation between the FHEQ and the FQ-EHEA is demonstrated in Appendix E: Mapping of the qualifications descriptors for the FHEQ with the Bologna FQ-EHEA cycle

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<sup>44</sup> For further information see: [www.jointquality.nl/content/descriptors/CompletesetDublinDescriptors.doc](http://www.jointquality.nl/content/descriptors/CompletesetDublinDescriptors.doc)

<sup>45</sup> Admission is also linked to degree classification. Following the recommendation of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Report, *Beyond the honours degree classification* of October 2007, the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) was piloted in 2008. HEAR is designed to measure and record student achievement and incorporate the Diploma Supplement. Further information can be accessed at: [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/Publication-272.aspx](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/Publication-272.aspx)

descriptors (Dublin descriptors for short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle awards). Based on this, and the work undertaken by the Advisory Group that produced the FHEQ 2008, this Advisory Group concluded that the correlations reproduced in table 1 (on page 4) are proven and appropriate.

In establishing these correlations the EWN Self-certification Advisory Group followed the important precedent established in the Irish self-certification Verification of Compatibility report, November 2006.<sup>46</sup> This used the notion of 'substantial difference' originating from the Lisbon Recognition Convention to aid the comparison of generic level and cycle descriptors. Thus the comparison between the FHEQ and FQ-EHEA descriptors was undertaken not to seek absolute equivalence but to seek a close fit between the two. However, it is important to note that all qualifications within the FHEQ developed by higher education providers must meet the expectations set out in the FHEQ.

### **3.3 Criterion 3: The national framework and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS-compatible credits**

The FHEQ 2008 states: 'The fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment rather than years of study'.<sup>47</sup> The FHEQ is a learning outcomes based structure. Across the UK learning outcomes are understood as a 'statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning'.<sup>48</sup> Learning outcomes permeate the UK Academic Infrastructure. The qualifications descriptors in the FHEQ are expressed as learning outcomes. These descriptors are reproduced in Appendix E. There is clear evidence of the implementation and impact of learning outcomes throughout the UK higher education system. One example of this can be found in the QAA qualitative analysis, published in 2007, of 70 institutional audits in England: *Outcomes from institutional audit - the adoption and use of learning outcomes*.<sup>49</sup> This report concluded that: 'The most striking aspect of their introduction has been, according to the audit reports, the value attached to them by students who appreciate the clarity they have brought to the overall purpose of their programme, the interrelationship between parts of the programme and the nature and purpose of assessment tasks.'

Subject benchmark statements describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications in that subject at a given level, in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards.

Programme specifications are a concise description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher education programme in a specific subject offered by an individual institution, and the means by which these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated.

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<sup>46</sup> *Verification of Compatibility of Irish National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework* can be accessed at: [www.nqai.ie/publication\\_nov2006.html](http://www.nqai.ie/publication_nov2006.html)

<sup>47</sup> FHEQ 2008, Section 1, paragraph 3, page 2. The full publication can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08)

<sup>48</sup> Definition used in the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England, 2008*, which can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit)

<sup>49</sup> This report can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/learningoutcomes.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/learningoutcomes.asp)

In higher education in EWNl the use of credit has a long history and has been extensively employed by HEIs - as previously mentioned in section 2.7.

Within the CQFW credit is awarded for the achievement of learning outcomes that have been verified through reliable and valid assessment in line with current rules and regulations. Credit is independent of grading. Credit is an award in its own right and can be accumulated towards qualifications under specific criteria. Each individual, externally validated award should be recognised as carrying a single general credit rating. The level of any qualification is established by matching its overall learning outcomes to the qualification descriptors in the FHEQ.

Through the establishment in 1994 of the Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales (HECIW) and its successor, the Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium (WHECC) in 2002, all aspects of the Credit Framework for Higher Education have been subject to full institutional consultation. Welsh institutions continue to work collaboratively on its implementation. The CQFW was also part of the membership of the CIDG, which developed the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*. This ensured compatibility of the Welsh and English arrangements.

Three complementary processes underpin the establishment of the CQFW: the higher education Credit Initiative Wales, adopted progressively by HEIs in Wales since it was developed in the mid-1990s; the Implementation Plan (2003), whereby all qualifications in Wales should be incorporated by 2006; and the Credit Common Accord (2003), designed to formalise agreement on terminology, design specifications, principles and systems to ensure that the currency of assigned and awarded credit is quality assured. Since 2003 all accredited learning continues to be brought into the single unifying structure of the CQFW.

In 2008 the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* was produced by the CIDG, which carried out the detailed work refining the arrangements for a national credit framework and developing guidance to accompany its implementation. The CIDG comprises the nominees of UUK, GuildHE, QAA, HEFCE and practitioners and representatives from existing credit consortia. Membership of the CIDG is reproduced in Appendix D.

It is useful to detail the new *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* as it is a recent document that illustrates the compatibility of EWNl credit practices with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Furthermore, the terminology and specifications it uses are fully compatible with those used by the Welsh Common Credit Accord. Across EWNl there is a common understanding of credit and usage of 120 credits to denote a volume of learning that a learner will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes in an academic year. The concept of notional learning time is considered important to UK credit practice as it acknowledges that it is helpful to indicate the time a learner (at a particular level) is expected to spend, on average, to achieve specified learning outcomes at that level. This acknowledges that individual learners may take more or less time to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

In the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* credit levels are aligned to the levels of the FHEQ which span study in higher education. These commence at level 4 (in succession to levels 1-3, which precede higher education) and extend to level 8. Higher education providers use credit level descriptors to assist in determining the level of credit assigned to individual modules and units that comprise programmes of study. Programmes leading to higher education qualifications, typically those taken over a number of years, often include modules or units from more than one level.

Credit level descriptors<sup>50</sup> are guides that identify the relative complexity, intellectual challenge, depth of learning and learner autonomy expected at each level, and the differences between the levels. They facilitate progression and represent a developmental continuum in which preceding levels are necessarily subsumed within those which follow. They reflect a range of factors, including:

- the complexity and depth of knowledge and understanding
- links to associated academic, vocational or professional practice
- the degree of integration, independence and creativity required
- the range and sophistication of application/practice
- the role(s) taken in relation to other learners/workers in carrying out tasks.

They are used as general descriptions of the learning involved at a particular level, and are not specific requirements of what must be covered in a module or unit.

The *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* includes a table,<sup>51</sup> reproduced in this report as table 3, which indicates the credit values typically associated with the design of programmes leading to main higher education qualifications in England. It does not express PhD/DPhil qualifications or, for example, qualifications in medicine, dentistry or veterinary sciences in terms of credit, as these are not typically credit-rated. Nor does it encompass the wide range of university certificates and diplomas awarded at levels 4 and 5 as these, and their titles are diverse; individual institutional frameworks describe the arrangements for these. Similarly, references to graduate certificates and diplomas and to postgraduate certificates and diplomas embrace a wide range of programmes, which increasingly include short courses offered to meet the needs of employers for continuing professional development of employees.

Column 1 in table 3 indicates the corresponding level of the qualification in the FHEQ, which is the framework with which institutions in England are expected to align their qualifications.

Column 2 in table 3 indicates the minimum credits that higher education providers typically use in designing programmes leading to the relevant qualification. Individual institutions may choose to specify a higher requirement or to allow students to undertake study leading to a higher number of credits in the context of their individual frameworks or on specific programmes. There are, in particular, two main variants in the concept of the graduate diploma (FHEQ level 6), both of which are consistent with the expectations of the FHEQ. The latter is typically one year long and comprises 120 EwNI credits; the other relates to programmes of shorter duration, for which 80 credits is typically the minimum. Similarly, some Professional Graduate Certificates in Education (FHEQ level 6) comprise 60 credits, but typically the credit volume exceeds this minimum where higher education providers credit-rate the professional practice element and integrate it into the programme. The precise requirements for individual programmes are normally specified in institutional regulations and indicated in programme specifications published by institutions. References to HNCs and HNDs are to those awarded by higher education awarding bodies under licence from Edexcel

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<sup>50</sup> The EwNI Credit Level Descriptors (formerly known as NICATS descriptors) are recommended as a reference point in the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*. Further information can be accessed at: [www.nicats.ac.uk/about/prn\\_tlevl\\_descriptors.pdf](http://www.nicats.ac.uk/about/prn_tlevl_descriptors.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*, 2008, pages 14-15. This document can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit). The original table has been amended to include text that clarifies the relationship between UK and ECTS credits. It also has some minor additions to demonstrate areas of divergence from the Welsh credit system.

and where the regulatory requirements may differ from those qualifications awarded by Edexcel.<sup>52</sup>

Column 3 in table 3 indicates the typical minimum credit at the level of the qualification. For example, a programme leading to a bachelor's degree with honours would normally comprise a minimum of three years' study with planned progression through the programme (in the relative difficulty and complexity of learning), culminating in most, if not all, of the final year of study at honours level. Using credit, this might be expressed as a typical minimum credit value of 360 credits, of which 90 credits would be the minimum credit at the level of the qualification (in this case, at level 6).

Column 4 indicates the corresponding FQ-EHEA cycles and column 5 provides the ECTS credit equivalents for the main UK higher education qualifications.

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<sup>52</sup> Edexcel is an awarding body and for-profit organisation offering academic and vocational qualifications and testing to schools, colleges, employers and other places of learning in the UK and internationally.

**Table 3: Credit values typically associated with the design of programmes leading to main higher education qualifications in England**

These credit values are for the most part identical to those used in Wales - any divergence is highlighted in red.

	1	2	3	4	5
HE qualifications as set out in the FHEQ	FHEQ level	Minimum credits*	Minimum credits at the level of the qualification	FQ-EHEA cycles	ECTS credit ranges from the FQ-EHEA
PhD/DPhil	8	Not typically credit-rated		Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications	Not typically credit-rated
Professional doctorates (only if credit based) (eg EdD, DBA, DCLinPsy)**		540	360		
Research master's degrees (eg MPhil, MLitt)	7	Not typically credit-rated		Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications	The minimum requirement is 60 ECTS credits; however a range of 90-120 ECTS credits is more typical at second cycle level
Taught MPhil		360	240		
Taught master's degrees (eg MA, MSc, MRes)		180	150		
Integrated master's degrees (eg MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm)***		480	120		
Postgraduate diplomas		120	90		
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)****		60 (Not denoted in Wales)	40		
Postgraduate certificates		60	40		
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg BA/BSc Hons)	6	360	90	First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications	180-240 ECTS credits
Bachelor's degrees		300	60		
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)****		60***** (Not denoted in Wales)	40		
Graduate diplomas		80 (120)	80 (90)		
Graduate certificates		40 (60)	40		
Foundation Degrees (eg FdA, FdSc)	5	240	90	Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications	approximately 120 ECTS credits
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		240	90		
Higher National Diplomas (HND)		240	90		
Higher National Certificates (HNC)*****	4	150	120 (30 at level 5)		
Certificates of Higher Education (Cert HE)		120	90		

Source: adapted from *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*, page 14

### Notes to table 3:

- \* Credit values shown are the minimum which are typically associated with the qualification and are included as guidance (in the light of sectoral practice) but are not prescriptive.
- \*\* Professional doctorate programmes include some taught elements in addition to the research dissertation. Credit practice varies but typically professional doctorates include a minimum of three calendar years' postgraduate study with level 7 study representing no more than one-third of this.
- \*\*\* Integrated master's degree programmes typically include at least 480 credits, of which at least 120 credits are at level 7.
- \*\*\*\* In April 2005, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, the Standing Conference of Principals (now Guild HE), Universities UK and QAA issued a joint statement on the PGCE qualification title. The full statement may be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/PGCEstatement.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/PGCEstatement.asp)
- \*\*\*\*\* Typically, the credit volume is likely to exceed this minimum where higher education providers credit-rate the professional practice element and integrate it in the programme, in line with guidance included in the *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning* published by QAA.
- \*\*\*\*\* Higher National Certificates (HNCs) are positioned at level 4, to reflect typical practice among higher education awarding bodies that award the HNC under licence from Edexcel.

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)<sup>53</sup> was initially developed in 1989 to promote the international recognition of qualifications and student mobility within Europe. Many higher education providers in England (and Wales and Northern Ireland) make use of ECTS to support student mobility in Europe.

ECTS is based on the principle that 60 ECTS credits are equivalent to the learning outcomes and associated workload of a typical full-time academic year of formal learning. In everyday practice, two UK credits are equivalent to one ECTS credit. For the award of ECTS credits, the learning outcomes of a qualification must be consistent with the relevant outcomes set out in the Dublin descriptors. The UK Higher Education Europe Unit has, in the past, provided a detailed explanation of the relationship between national arrangements for credit in higher education in England and ECTS.<sup>54</sup> This is currently being updated in the light of revisions to the ECTS Users Guide.

The FQ-EHEA identifies the range of ECTS credits typically associated with the completion of each cycle as follows:

- short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications - approximately 120 ECTS credits
- first cycle qualifications - 180-240 ECTS credits
- second cycle qualifications - 60-120 ECTS credits with a minimum of 60 credits at second cycle level. However, a range of between 90 and 120 is more typical of many awards
- third cycle qualifications do not necessarily have credits associated with them.

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<sup>53</sup> Further information about the ECTS can be accessed at:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm)

<sup>54</sup> See [www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe\\_unit2/resources/UKHEGuidanceCreditinEngland-ECTS.doc](http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/resources/UKHEGuidanceCreditinEngland-ECTS.doc)

Therefore, bachelor's degrees with honours in EWNI, with a typical total volume of at least 360 credits, equate to 180 ECTS credits. Integrated master's degrees comprising 480 credits, of which 120 credits are at level 7, equate to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level. More typically, master's degrees that have a minimum total of 180 credits equate to 90 ECTS credits. For each of these master's qualifications, 120 of the UK credits (60 ECTS) must be at level 7 and the outcomes must meet the expectations of the FHEQ level 7 and the Dublin descriptor for the second cycle.

The FHEQ and its qualifications are demonstrably based on learning outcomes and the qualifications are linked to ECTS or ECTS-compatible credits.

### **3.4 Criterion 4: The procedures for inclusion of qualifications in the national framework are transparent**

The FHEQ descriptors exemplify the nature and characteristics of the main qualification at each level, and comparison demonstrates the nature and characteristics of change between qualifications at different levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications. However, the FHEQ is also designed to have the flexibility to accommodate diversity and innovation, and to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises.

It is the responsibility of higher education awarding bodies, as autonomous institutions awarding their own qualifications,<sup>55</sup> to position their higher education qualifications correctly within the FHEQ. Higher education awarding bodies are required to assure the public that the achievements represented by their qualifications are appropriate and represented consistently. Higher education awarding bodies are responsible for demonstrating that each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ. This is achieved by the process known as programme approval. Programme approval is the internal quality assurance process used to scrutinise a proposed programme of study in order to assure that it meets the standards and quality of the higher education awarding body and national expectations. Programme approval is conducted through a process of informed and impartial peer review in order to confirm that it meets the required standards and offers high quality learning opportunities for students. All existing programmes are periodically subject to a similar process to review them.

In considering the appropriate level for a qualification, higher education awarding bodies consider:

- the relationship between the intended outcomes of the programme and the expectations set out in the qualification descriptors
- whether there is a sufficient volume of assessed study to demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved
- whether the design of the curriculum and assessments is such that all students following the programme have the opportunity to achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes.

When designing and approving programmes, higher education providers have to ensure that a coherent learning experience is delivered and that due consideration is given to the precepts and explanatory text relating to programme design in the *QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*.<sup>56</sup> In addition, higher education providers have to take account

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<sup>55</sup> Some HEIs, who do not possess degree awarding powers, offer programmes validated by other institutions.

<sup>56</sup> Further information on the precept can be accessed at:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp)

of the regulatory and other requirements of the PSRBs that accredit specific professional programmes.

The FHEQ is designed to be a transparent reference point that assists HEIs in the maintenance of their standards, as well as to have real benefits for the learner.

Not all higher education qualifications will meet the qualification descriptors in full. For example, table 1 lists the typical higher education qualifications at each level, but not all the qualifications at each level will meet all of the expectations of the qualification descriptor. The qualifications are differentiated by the volume of learning and this in turn leads to variation in the range of intended learning outcomes. Some qualifications (for instance, Foundation Degrees) have been specifically designed to facilitate progression to subsequent levels. Section 4 of the FHEQ - Qualification descriptors - provides further information about the qualification descriptor for each level of the framework and gives examples of qualifications that meet each descriptor in full, and where the qualification descriptor can be used as a reference point for other qualifications at the same level.

The FHEQ contains guidance designed to assist higher education providers in achieving consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, nature and subjects of study. See section 5 of the FHEQ: The FHEQ - implementation issues and guidance.<sup>57</sup>

QAA keeps under review the need for any additional qualification descriptors, or amendment to them, in the light of the development of other points of reference, such as subject benchmark statements or European developments, for example, arising from the Bologna Process.

### **3.5 Criterion 5: The national quality assurance systems for higher education refer to the national framework of qualifications and are consistent with the Berlin Communiqué and any subsequent communiqué agreed by ministers in the Bologna Process**

The national quality assurance system for higher education not only refers to the national framework of qualifications but the latter plays a central role in the whole structure, process and approach to quality at institutional and national levels. For EwNI the FHEQ is an important and deeply embedded foundation of the Academic Infrastructure overseen by QAA. This is detailed throughout this report.

The Bologna ministers in the 2003 Berlin Communiqué stated that by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include:

- a definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved
- evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results
- a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures
- international participation, co-operation and networking.<sup>58</sup>

The Bologna ministers in the 2005 Bergen Communiqué stated that:

We adopt the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA. We commit ourselves to introducing the

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<sup>57</sup> FHEQ 2008, paragraphs 65-75, under the heading 'Naming qualifications'.

<sup>58</sup> Berlin Communiqué 2003: [www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/030919Berlin\\_Communique.PDF](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/030919Berlin_Communique.PDF)

proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis, while respecting the commonly accepted guidelines and criteria.<sup>59</sup>

These communiqués represent a development of national and international agreement, thought and good practice in the quality assurance sphere. QAA has the function of providing an integrated quality assurance service, which includes a quality enhancement function, for all providers of higher education in the UK. As part of its broader mission QAA has also committed itself to the promotion of good practice in quality assurance in Europe and elsewhere in the world. To this end QAA (and its predecessor bodies) has played an active and leading role in all the major European higher education quality assurance developments, from the European Pilot Project of 1994-95 to the establishment of the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) in 1999, the Network's transformation into an Association in 2004, the drafting of the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG) in 2005 and the subsequent work towards the creation of a register of European quality assurance agencies (2007 onwards).

QAA has undergone an external review to assess the level of its compliance against the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*,<sup>60</sup> in order to reconfirm membership of ENQA for a further five years. It underwent a 'type A' external review, as defined by ENQA in its *Guidelines for national reviews of ENQA member agencies*,<sup>61</sup> the purpose of which is limited to an examination of the extent of QAA's compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines. The 40-page QAA self-evaluation document was structured with the ESG specifically in mind and designed to facilitate the understanding of QAA compliance with the ESG. The document provides a comprehensive mapping of QAA activities and processes against the ESG, detailed in Part 2: European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher educations and Part 3: European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies. The QAA document maps its compliance against each ESG 'standard' and 'guideline'. At the meeting of the ENQA Board in November 2008, QAA's continued membership of the Association was confirmed on the basis of the outcome of the external review. The review confirmed that QAA was fully compliant with 14 of the ESG and substantially compliant with the remaining two. The report of the review is available on QAA's website.<sup>62</sup>

### **3.6 Criterion 6: The national framework, and any alignment with the European framework, is referenced in all Diploma Supplements**

The FHEQ 2001 is already referenced in the description of higher education in EWN1 in section 8 of the Diploma Supplement.<sup>63</sup> This nationally agreed description and its diagrammatic representation also includes reference to the cycles of the Bologna Process. The current referencing will be updated to take account of the revised 2008 edition of the FHEQ and the outcome of this self-certification process. HEFCE is currently collating information on the extent of the implementation of the Diploma Supplement in England.

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<sup>59</sup> Bergen Communiqué 2005 can be accessed at: [www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050520\\_Bergen\\_Communique.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* can be accessed at: [www.enqa.eu/files/ESG\\_v03.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_v03.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> QAA's self-evaluation document for review of its membership of ENQA can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/international/ENQA/SED08](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/international/ENQA/SED08)

<sup>62</sup> The report of the QAA review for the purpose of re-confirming its ENQA membership can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/international/ENQA/ENQARevReport.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/international/ENQA/ENQARevReport.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> These respective descriptions can be accessed at: [www.uknec.org.uk/documents/ds\\_description.pdf](http://www.uknec.org.uk/documents/ds_description.pdf) and [www.uknec.org.uk/documents/ds\\_chart.pdf](http://www.uknec.org.uk/documents/ds_chart.pdf)

### **3.7 Criterion 7: The responsibilities of the domestic parties to the national framework are clearly determined and published**

The responsibilities of the EWNI domestic parties to the FHEQ have been previously referred to in various sections of this report. There is a set of interlocking responsibilities that characterise the situation. QAA has a clear responsibility for the maintenance and assurance of quality in the UK and this includes the FHEQ. Universities, colleges and other higher education providers are for the most part responsible for the academic standards and quality of their own degrees and other awards; this is described as internal quality assurance. QAA carries out external quality assurance by judging how reliably the universities and colleges fulfil their responsibilities.

In EWNI higher education institutions are independent, self-governing bodies active in teaching, research and scholarship and established by Royal Charter or legislation. Most are part-funded by government. All the universities and many of the higher education colleges have the legal power to develop their own programmes and award their own degrees, and determine the conditions on which they are awarded. Some higher education colleges and specialist institutions without these powers offer programmes, with varying extents of devolved authority, leading to the awards of an institution with degree awarding powers with whom they are in partnership.

All these institutions are subject to the same regulatory quality assurance and funding requirements as universities; all institutions decide for themselves which students to admit and which staff to appoint. Degrees and other higher education qualifications are legally owned by the awarding institution, not by the state. The names of institutions with their own degree awarding powers, 'Recognised Bodies', are set out on the DIUS website.<sup>64</sup> Institutions able to offer programmes leading to a degree from a recognised body, 'Listed Bodies', are recorded by the English, Welsh and Northern Irish authorities. The list can also be found on the DIUS website.

The types of qualifications awarded by higher education awarding bodies at sub-degree, undergraduate (first cycle) and postgraduate level (second and third cycles) are described in the FHEQ. Higher education providers are required by the FHEQ to demonstrate how each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ.

It is important to emphasise that academic standards are established and maintained by higher education awarding bodies themselves using an extensive and sophisticated range of shared quality assurance approaches and structures. Standards and quality in institutions are underpinned by the universal use of external examiners, a standard set of indicators and other reports and by the activities of QAA, and in professional areas by relevant PSRBs. This ensures that institutions meet national expectations described in the FHEQ. The Academic Infrastructure is the complex set of interrelated reference points by which institutional quality and standards are described.

The main type of external quality assurance of higher education used in the UK is institutional review, which is carried out by QAA. This takes a number of different forms and names. In England and Northern Ireland it is called institutional audit, and in Wales, institutional review. While each of the review types has a different emphasis, all have a similar fundamental function: to examine the internal quality assurance policies and processes and to assess and report publicly on the level of confidence that can be placed in the institution's management of academic quality and standards. An explicit function stated in the handbooks is to ascertain whether institutions have effective means of ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in the FHEQ.

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<sup>59</sup> A list of 'Recognised Bodies' and 'Listed Bodies' can be accessed on the DIUS website at: [www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees)

## **4 Procedures for self-certifying that the national qualifications framework (FHEQ) is compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)**

### **4.1 Procedure 1: The competent national body/bodies shall certify the compatibility of the national framework with the European framework**

QAA is the competent body to certify the compatibility of the FHEQ with the Bologna framework. QAA was established in 1997 to provide an integrated quality assurance service for higher education in the UK. It is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and higher education colleges, and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies. As a not-for-profit organisation, it is not owned by, or formally accountable to, governmental authorities in the UK. It does, however, have a large range of stakeholders, all of whom have an interest in ensuring that QAA meets its international objectives and responsibilities.

QAA is governed by a Board (see Appendix A), which has overall responsibility for the conduct and strategic direction of its business. The Board has 15 members: four are appointed by the representative bodies of the heads of higher education institutions; four are appointed by the funding bodies in higher education; six are independent directors with wide practical experience of industry, commerce, finance or the practice of a profession, and are appointed by the Board as a whole; and one is a student, also appointed by the Board. This membership represents a wide group of stakeholders.

To achieve its mission, QAA works in partnership with the providers and funders of higher education, staff and students in higher education, employers and other stakeholders. A major purpose and responsibility of QAA is to safeguard the student and wider public interest in the maintenance of standards of academic awards and the quality of higher education.

The FHEQ is maintained by QAA in accordance with the recommendations of *Higher Education in the learning society* (the Dearing report).<sup>65</sup> The FHEQ 2001 was fully implemented by 2003-2004 and the valuable experience gained from this was fed into the revision process for the FHEQ 2008.

QAA was responsible for convening the two working groups that respectively reviewed the FHEQ and produced the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* in August 2008. It is important to note that the finalisation and approval of these two documents took full account of the Bologna developments and respectively mapped the EwNI qualifications against the Bologna Framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

QAA convened the EwNI Self-certification Advisory Group, whose members represent a variety of stakeholders (see Appendix B for full details of membership).

The Self-certification Advisory Group met on 31 July, 8 October and 24 October 2008. The self-certification document was approved by QAA's Executive Committee in Gloucester on 9 February 2009.

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<sup>65</sup> *Higher Education in the learning society* (the Dearing report), 1997, can be accessed at: [www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe)

## **4.2 Procedure 2: The self-certification process shall include the stated agreement of the quality assurance bodies in the country in question recognised through the Bologna Process**

QAA's mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of UK higher education qualifications throughout the UK and wherever it is delivered across the world, and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. QAA achieves this by working with higher education providers to define academic standards and quality, and by carrying out and publishing reviews using these standards.

QAA is responsible for: running the quality assurance systems for higher education in EWNl; the maintenance, review and assurance of the FHEQ; and the self-certification process.

## **4.3 Procedure 3: The self-certification process shall involve international experts**

The membership of the Self-certification Advisory Group included the following international experts:

- Sjur Bergan, Head of Department for Higher Education and History Teaching, Council of Europe
- Dr Marlies Leegwater, Senior Policy Advisor, Ministry of Education, Netherlands
- Staffan Wahlen, former Senior Advisor, Högskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education)
- Dr Bryan Maguire, Director of Academic Affairs, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), Republic of Ireland.

## **4.4 Procedure 4: The self-certification and the evidence supporting it shall be published and shall address separately each of the criteria set out**

The self-certification report is published and available on QAA's website.<sup>66</sup> The report will also be available on the Bologna Process website<sup>67</sup> and the ENIC-NARIC website.<sup>68</sup> In addition, an information leaflet on the self-certification process and its significance will be produced for distribution to UK stakeholders and to Bologna partners and other interested parties overseas.

## **4.5 Procedure 5: The ENIC and NARIC networks shall maintain a public listing of States that have confirmed that they have completed the self-certification process**

QAA will inform the UK ENIC-NARIC when the self-certification process is completed. Dr Cloud Bai-Yun, Head of UK ENIC-NARIC, is a member of the EWNl Self-certification Advisory Group. The ENIC-NARIC network will also be informed of the successful completion of the process for appropriate posting on its website.

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<sup>66</sup> QAA's website can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

<sup>67</sup> The Bologna Process website can be accessed at: [www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/national.asp](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/national.asp)

<sup>68</sup> The ENIC-NARIC website can be accessed at: [www.enic-naric.net](http://www.enic-naric.net)

#### **4.6 Procedure 6: The completion of the self-certification process shall be noted on Diploma Supplements issued subsequently by showing the link between the national framework and the European framework**

Diploma Supplements in the UK are issued by autonomous higher education providers. Section 8 of the Diploma Supplement, entitled Information on the national higher education system, provides contextual information on the higher education system within which any particular qualification originates. The UK Higher Education Europe Unit, working closely with the higher education representative bodies, produced a nationally agreed description and diagram of the EWNH higher education system in 2005. This description was approved by the Europe Unit High Level Policy Forum, comprising heads of UK higher education stakeholder organisations. This description will be updated to record the successful self-certification and distributed to all EWNH HEIs.

## **5 Conclusion**

The EWNI Self-certification Advisory Group concludes that *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, in totality, is fully compatible with the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)*.

## **Appendix A: Membership of the Board of Directors of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)**

<b>Mr Sam Younger CBE (Chair)</b>	Chairman	The Electoral Commission
<b>Dr Susan Atkins</b>	Service Complaints Commissioner	
<b>Professor Paul Curran</b>	Vice-Chancellor	Bournemouth University
<b>Mr Will Haywood</b>	Student	Sheffield Hallam University
<b>Professor Tony Hazell</b>	Former Chairman	Velindre NHS Trust
<b>Mrs Beverley Hunt</b>	Director and Independent Consultant	B G Hunt Associates
<b>Professor Nick Kuenssberg OBE</b>	Chairman	Glasgow School of Art
<b>Mr John Latham</b>	Chief Executive Officer and Principal	Cornwall College
<b>Professor Noel Lloyd</b>	Vice-Chancellor	Aberystwyth University
<b>Professor Arthur Lucas AO CBE</b>	Former Principal	King's College London
<b>Professor Michael Pittilo</b>	Principal and Vice-Chancellor	The Robert Gordon University Aberdeen
<b>Mr Andrew Ramsay</b>	Chief Executive Officer	Engineering Council UK
<b>Mr Andrew Summers CMG</b>	Chairman	Companies House
<b>Professor Elaine Thomas</b>	Rector	University for the Creative Arts
<b>Mr Robin Vaughan</b>	Director of Professional Standards	Chartered Institute of Management Accountants

### **Observers**

<b>Professor Paul Ramsden</b>	Invited observer representing the Higher Education Academy
<b>Mrs Mary Degg</b>	Invited observer representing government education departments

## Appendix B: Membership of the FHEQ Self-certification Advisory Group

<b>Dr Jayne Mitchell (Chair)</b>	Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
<b>Mr Stephen Adam (rapporteur)</b>	Independent	Formerly of University of Westminster and former UK Bologna Promoter
<b>Dr Cloud Bai-Yun</b>	Head	UK ENIC-NARIC/NRP
<b>Mr Sjur Bergan</b>	Head of the Department of Higher Education and History Teaching	Council of Europe
<b>Mr Alex Bols</b>	Head of Education and Quality	National Union of Students (NUS)
<b>Ms Helen Bowles</b>	Policy Advisor	GuildHE
<b>Ms Sarah Butler</b>	Director of Academic Quality; member of the Academic Registrars' Council (ARC) Quality Practitioners Group	University of Sussex
<b>Ms Carolyn Campbell</b>	Head of International Affairs	QAA
<b>Mr Damian Day</b>	Head of Accreditation	Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain
<b>Dr Nick Harris (retired)</b>	Formerly Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
<b>Professor Alex Hughes</b>	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, External; chair of FHEQ (EWNI) Advisory Group	University of Kent
<b>Dr Marlies Leegwater</b>	Senior Policy Advisor	Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, Netherlands
<b>Dr Bryan Maguire</b>	Director of Academic Affairs	Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)
<b>Ms Rachel Mooney</b>	Senior Credit Manager, Higher Education	Welsh Assembly Government
<b>Professor Muriel Robinson</b>	Principal; Chair of CIDG	Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln
<b>Mr Greg Wade</b>	Policy Advisor	Universities UK
<b>Mr Staffan Wahlén</b>	Former Senior Advisor	Högskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education)
<b>Mr Peter Williams</b>	Chief Executive	QAA
<b>Ms Rebecca Wright</b>	Joint Manager	UK Europe Unit

## Appendix C: Membership of the FHEQ Advisory Group

Mr Keith Bartlett	Deputy Principal	Norwich University College of the Arts
Ms Helen Bowles	Policy Advisor	GuildHE
Ms Sarah Butler	Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
Ms Siobhán Greenan	Higher Education Policy Officer	Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
Dr Nick Harris	Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
Professor Alex Hughes (Chair)	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, External	University of Kent
Professor Stuart Laing	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic Affairs	University of Brighton
Professor Derek Longhurst	Chief Executive	<i>fdf</i> (Foundation Degree Forward)
Dr Anne Miller	Director of Quality Support	Liverpool John Moores University
Dr Jayne Mitchell	Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
Ms Rachel Mooney	Senior Credit Manager, higher education	Welsh Assembly Government
Professor Bob Munn	Retired; formerly Vice-President, Teaching and Learning	University of Manchester
Professor Gill Nicholls	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic	University of Salford
Ms Rowena Pelik	Director of Academic Development	Napier University
Professor Ella Ritchie	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching & Learning)	Newcastle University
Mr Wes Streeting	Vice-President, Education	National Union of Students
Mr Greg Wade	Policy Advisor	Universities UK

## Appendix D: Membership of the Credit Issues Development Group (CIDG)

<b>Ms Helen Bowles</b>	Policy Advisor	GuildHE
<b>Ms Tish Bourke</b>	Joint Manager	UK HE Europe Unit
<b>Professor Paul H Bridges</b>	Clerk to Governing Council, University of Derby	EWNI credit forum representative
<b>Ms Sarah Butler</b>	Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
<b>Ms Margaret Cameron</b>	SCQF Manager	SCQF
<b>Mr Trevor Clark</b>	Head of Credit Framework Development	Welsh Assembly Government
<b>Dr Nick Harris</b>	Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
<b>Ms Dorothy Haslehurst</b>	Associate Dean, University of Portsmouth	EWNI credit forum representative
<b>Dr Kath Hodgson</b>	Director of Learning & Teaching Support	University of Leeds
<b>Dr Jayne Mitchell</b>	Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
<b>Ms Jessica Olley</b>	Joint Manager	UK HE Europe Unit
<b>Professor Muriel Robinson (Chair)</b>	Principal	Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln
<b>Professor Rob Robson</b>	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning)	University of Reading
<b>Mr Wes Streeting</b>	Vice-President, Education	National Union of Students
<b>Mr Greg Wade</b>	Policy Advisor	Universities UK
<b>Ms Cath Walsh</b>	Director	Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance
<b>Ms Sheila Wolfenden</b>	Policy Officer, Learning and Teaching	Higher Education Funding Council for England

## **Appendix E: Mapping of the qualifications descriptors for the FHEQ with the Bologna FQ-EHEA cycle descriptors (Dublin descriptors for short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle awards)**

### **Origin and development of the two sets of descriptors**

The FHEQ qualifications descriptors were first published in 2001 and have been revised and updated in the second edition of the FHEQ, published in August 2008. The Dublin descriptors were developed by the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) in the period 2002-2004. They were subsequently adopted, as part of the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FQ-EHEA), by ministers at their Bologna meeting held in Bergen in 2005.

The FHEQ descriptors have a relatively long history of development, which included an extensive programme of work and consultation.

### **FHEQ and FQ-EHEA: Similarities and differences**

The two sets of FHEQ and FQ-EHEA descriptors have many common features. The primary differences are a matter of their relative role, the amount of detail they contain and the overall number of cycles/levels. The FHEQ levels, in effect, sub-divide the Bologna cycles. As a national qualifications framework the FHEQ level descriptors contain more detail and precision in order to:

- provide important points of reference for setting and assessing academic standards to higher education providers and their external examiners
- assist in the identification of potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning
- promote a shared and common understanding of the expectations associated with typical qualifications by facilitating a consistent use of qualifications titles across the higher education sector.<sup>69</sup>

Both sets of descriptors depict higher education qualifications in terms of generic learning outcomes. They both employ descriptors that exemplify the nature and characteristics of the main qualification at each level.<sup>70</sup> They provide clear points of reference and describe the outcomes of typical end of cycle/level qualifications and not threshold standards or minimum standards. Both sets of descriptors were developed as a set and are intended to be read with reference to each other. However, the FQ-EHEA descriptors are primarily intended to assist the development and alignment of national frameworks and help ensure comparability between them.

National qualifications frameworks commonly have additional elements or outcomes and more detailed and specific functions, as typified by the first two national frameworks to self-certificate under the Bologna Process - Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

The FQ-EHEA descriptors were built on the following elements:

- knowledge and understanding
- applying knowledge and understanding
- making judgements

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<sup>69</sup> FHEQ, paragraph 12, which can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ)

<sup>70</sup> The FHEQ contains a chart reproduced from the JQI that illustrates the differences/step changes between the respective Dublin descriptors, on pages 40-41.

- communications skills
- learning skills.

The FQ-EHEA descriptors are not meant to be prescriptive, nor exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted. The descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification. They are not subject specific, nor are they limited to academic, professional or vocational areas. For particular disciplines the descriptors are designed to be read within the context and language of that discipline. Wherever possible, they should be cross-referenced with any expectations/competencies published by the relevant community of scholars and/or practitioners.

The FHEQ is a national qualifications framework. Each level is illustrated by, and each award determined by reference to, a qualification descriptor. The qualification descriptors reflect distinct levels of intellectual achievement associated with the typical higher education qualifications awarded by higher education providers in EWNI, in accordance with their degree awarding powers.

The FHEQ has five levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. These are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher education in the *National Qualifications Framework (NQF)* and the *Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)*.

The FHEQ qualifications descriptors are designed with flexibility to allow for diversity and innovation, and to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises. Its qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part is of particular relevance to higher education providers in designing, approving and reviewing academic programmes. The second part is a statement of the wider abilities that the typical student could be expected to have developed. It is of assistance to higher education providers during discussions with employers and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of the qualification.

Each descriptor sets out the outcomes for the typical qualification at each level - for levels 6, 7 and 8 this is usually a degree.

At most levels there may be more than one type of qualification that can be achieved. Short programmes are often offered as continuing professional development opportunities. The qualification descriptors provide points of reference, which help institutions determine at what level of the FHEQ any qualifications resulting from such programmes should be placed. A range of qualifications is encompassed by each level of the FHEQ. Each level is deliberately broad to provide flexibility and space for the development of new qualifications, for example, occupation-related awards.

There is a strong relationship between the FHEQ qualifications descriptors and other points of reference for academic standards. The FHEQ qualifications descriptors are linked to other parts of the Academic Infrastructure in a number of ways.

- **Qualification descriptors** are generic statements of the intended outcomes of study. Many academic programmes aim to develop general and specific skills. These are not explicitly addressed in the qualification descriptors, as many skills and the extent to which they need to be developed are discipline or profession specific. As such, they are addressed more appropriately in subject benchmark statements and individual programme specifications.

- **Subject benchmark statements** are detailed statements on the expected outcomes in particular subjects. These have been produced for typical and threshold standards in bachelor's degrees with honours, and have been produced for other levels where there is significant taught provision in a subject (for example, MEng). A single qualifications benchmark statement has also been produced to provide a reference point for the Foundation Degree qualification. In areas where there is no benchmark statement, or where more than one such statement may be relevant, the statements of generic outcomes contained in the qualification descriptors provide a particularly important point of reference.
- **Programme specifications** are provided by institutions and contain specific statements about the intended outcomes of an individual programme. These define the specific outcomes of learning for a qualification in a particular subject area offered by that institution.<sup>71</sup>

QAA keeps under review the need for any additional qualification descriptors, or amendment to them, in the light of the development of other points of reference, such as subject benchmark statements or European developments, for example, arising from the Bologna Process.

## **FHEQ, FQ-EHEA and credit**

The FHEQ is a qualifications framework, based on the outcomes represented by the main qualification titles. It is not a credit framework, nor is it dependent on the use of credit. Nevertheless, credit is widely used by higher education providers in EWNI.

In England, the Burgess Group published recommendations on national arrangements for the use of academic credit in higher education in England and the subsequent Credit Issues Development Group (CIDG) has drawn up a national credit framework and provided guidance in accordance with these recommendations. While the framework and guidance are advisory, and their application remains a matter for individual institutions to decide on at their discretion, English institutions that elect to use credit are strongly encouraged to read, in conjunction with the FHEQ, *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*. QAA has published a statement to outline the relationship between the credit framework for England and the FHEQ and how both frameworks relate to academic standards. Together, they form an integral part of quality assurance in higher education and institutions use them in planning, delivering and monitoring their study programmes.<sup>72</sup>

In Wales all HEIs have signed up to the CQFW Credit Common Accord. Welsh institutions are encouraged to read, in conjunction with the FHEQ, the recommendations and guidelines set out in the *Higher Education in Wales Credit Specification and Guidance* (CQFW, June 2004).<sup>73</sup>

The design of academic programmes has to make some assumptions about the amount of learning that is likely to be necessary to achieve the intended outcomes. In some cases this is expressed in terms of study time, for example a number of academic years. In other cases this is expressed through credit. The FHEQ itself does not specify minimum or typical volumes of learning by reference to units of credit. However, the credit frameworks for both England and

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<sup>71</sup> Further information about QAA's Academic Infrastructure can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure). Further information about the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.asp)

<sup>72</sup> This statement can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit)

<sup>73</sup> Further information is available at: <http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/creditqualificationsframework/?lang=en>

Wales provide guidance on the credit volumes associated with the typical qualifications at each level of the FHEQ. The guidance in these credit frameworks can also support a consistent approach to academic standards across the higher education sector.

The outcomes associated with a qualification should be understood in a holistic way (qualifications are more than just the sum of their parts), and their achievement should be demonstrated directly. However, different qualifications within the same level have different volumes of learning, which lead to a different range of learning outcomes. For example, a 'degree' can properly be awarded only when the expectations of the relevant qualification descriptor have been met or exceeded. Diplomas generally indicate a smaller volume of learning than a degree but a larger volume than certificates (and an associated differentiation in the range of intended learning outcomes). A range of diplomas and certificates are offered by higher education providers. If positioned at level 7 they are titled postgraduate certificates and diplomas and if positioned at level 6 they are titled graduate certificates and diplomas; other certificates and diplomas are generally positioned at levels 4 or 5.

The *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* identifies the purposes and benefits of credit and credit frameworks, pointing out their potential roles in supporting progression into and within higher education, and transfer between programmes, by indicating the volume and intellectual demand of learning. The framework:

- comprises a table of the credit values typically associated with the design of programmes leading to the main higher education qualifications in England; these are expressed, for each qualification, both as the minimum total credits and the minimum credits at the level of the award
- includes the EWNI generic credit level descriptors which may be used as a reference point
- includes a proposed timetable for implementation.

The document refers to national contexts within the UK and also international aspects, describing the relationship between UK credit and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The relationships between credit and qualifications frameworks and the setting and assuring of academic standards are also discussed.

ECTS is based on the principle that 60 ECTS credits are equivalent to the learning outcomes and associated workload of a typical full-time academic year of formal learning. In everyday practice, two UK credits are equivalent to one ECTS credit. For the award of ECTS credits, the learning outcomes of a qualification must be consistent with the relevant outcomes set out in the Dublin descriptors. The UK higher education Europe Unit has provided a detailed explanation of the relationship between national arrangements for credit in higher education in England and the ECTS.

The FQ-EHEA identifies the range of ECTS credits typically associated with the completion of each cycle as follows:

- short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications - approximately 120 ECTS credits
- first cycle qualifications - 180-240 ECTS credits
- second cycle qualifications - 60-120 ECTS credits; however, a range of between 90 and 120 is more typical of many awards
- third cycle qualifications do not necessarily have credits associated with them.

Therefore, bachelor's degrees with honours in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with a typical total volume of at least 360 credits, equate to 180 ECTS credits, as long as the learning outcomes are consistent with the relevant Dublin descriptor. Integrated master's degrees comprising 480 credits, of which 120 credits are at level 7, equate to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level. More typically, master's degrees that have a minimum total of 180 credits equate to 90 ECTS credits. For each of these master's qualifications, 120 of the UK credits (60 ECTS) must be at level 7 and the outcomes must meet the expectations of the Dublin descriptor at the second cycle level.

## **FHEQ and FQ-EHEA: Areas which benefit from additional clarification**

The self-certification exercise has highlighted a number of areas for clarification for those unfamiliar with the specifics of some EWNI qualifications. In particular, there are potential misunderstandings associated with the following: FHEQ level 4 - Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE); FHEQ level 5 - Foundation Degrees; FHEQ level 6 - bachelor's degrees (non-honours degrees); and FHEQ level 7 - integrated master's degrees.

**Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)** are not short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications as defined by the Dublin descriptors. They attract a EWNI minimum credit value of 120 credits, which equates to 60 ECTS credits, and this is less than the 120 ECTS credit that the Dublin short cycle encompasses. They are also not normally expected to give any access to employment. In addition to Certificates of Higher Education, the FHEQ contains a diversity of intermediate qualifications at first and second cycle levels that have a range of distinctive purposes.

**Foundation Degrees** (FHEQ level 5) fit with the Dublin short-cycle descriptor as the FHEQ descriptor, together with the QAA Foundation Degree qualification benchmark, enjoy a close match. Details of this are illustrated in table 4. This correspondence is facilitated by the existence of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark statement*.<sup>74</sup> Foundation Degrees were introduced by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES - now renamed Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS)) in 2000 to provide graduates who are needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills. Foundation Degrees also aim to contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning by encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher level qualification.

Foundation Degrees do not however, represent an end of first cycle higher education qualification in terms of the Bologna declaration; further study and assessments are required to complete the first cycle, which in EWNI is typically represented by the award of a bachelor's degree with honours. Foundation Degrees give access to bachelor's degrees and bachelor's honours degrees.

Foundation Degrees integrate academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and programme providers. They build upon a long history of design and delivery of vocational qualifications in higher education, and are intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers. They are designed to appeal to learners wishing to enter a profession as well as those seeking continuing professional development. They can also provide pathways for lifelong learning and the opportunity to progress to other qualifications. The qualification may be offered through flexible modes of learning, enabling learners to 'earn and learn' and accommodate the learning needs of different types of students.

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<sup>74</sup> This can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/benchmark/fdqb.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/benchmark/fdqb.asp)

Foundation Degrees thus have a range of distinctive characteristics not necessarily present in other qualifications at the intermediate level, nor found in the initial parts of programmes that lead directly to bachelor's degrees with honours.

**Bachelor's degrees** (FHEQ level 6) are undergraduate awards of typically three years' duration. These are sometime described as 'ordinary degrees' or 'pass degrees' and they are awarded as 'unclassified' (without honours) to all students who have successfully completed the requisite programme of learning. These degrees sometimes have a lower entrance requirement than bachelor's degrees with honours. In some cases a bachelor's degree may be awarded if a student has completed the full honours degree course but hasn't obtained the total required passes sufficient to merit a third-class honours degree.

All bachelor's degrees follow the normal internal quality assurance process that HEIs use to validate new (and review existing) qualifications. The particular characteristic of each bachelor's degree is articulated in its approved programme specification. The approval process includes close reference to the appropriate subject benchmark statement and FHEQ generic qualifications descriptor. In the case of the bachelor's degree this is the first cycle (end of cycle) bachelor's degree with honours level 6 descriptor. Bachelor's degrees are consistent with the FQ-EHEA first cycle descriptor. Therefore, table 5, which illustrates the relationship between the bachelor's degrees with honours and the Bologna first cycle descriptors, also demonstrates the relationships for the bachelor's degrees. This is also exemplified when the learning outcomes of bachelor's degrees are matched with these two sets of descriptors. Variations in the volume and standard of learning between bachelor's degrees and bachelor's degrees with honours do not amount to 'substantial differences' in terms of the understanding employed by the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

**Integrated master's degrees** (FHEQ level 7) exist in science, engineering, pharmacy and mathematics. They comprise an integrated programme of study spanning several FHEQ levels where the outcomes are normally achieved through study equivalent to four full-time academic years. While the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves meet the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at FHEQ level 7 (Bologna second cycle) in full, such qualifications are often termed 'integrated master's' as an acknowledgement of the additional period of study at lower levels (which typically meets the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at FHEQ level 6). Table 6 on page 52 explains the relationship between master's degrees and the Bologna second cycle descriptors. It is the responsibility of higher education providers to ensure there is clear progression throughout the qualifications encompassing FHEQ levels 6 and 7 and FQ-EHEA first and second cycles. This is ensured through the identification of appropriate learning outcomes.

It is recognised that the FHEQ integrated master's degrees, particularly four-year integrated master's programmes, have some characteristics that seem at first glance to make them incompatible with the FQ-EHEA because of their integrated nature and apparent shorter duration. This is exacerbated by the funding of such programmes that, for historical reasons, deems them 'undergraduate awards', where they clearly are not. However, the credit values associated with FHEQ integrated master's degrees fully conform to the Bologna ECTS credit values (see table 3 on page 26). They conform to the minimum credit requirement of 60 ECTS credits at second cycle (120 ECTS credits at FHEQ level 7). Furthermore, many integrated master's awards exceed this minimum. The learning outcomes for these programmes have been agreed by the professions and the academic community in the UK and are consonant with both the level 7 master's qualifications descriptor in the FHEQ and the second cycle FQ-EHEA descriptor.

## **Mapping of each FHEQ qualifications descriptor with the appropriate Bologna cycle descriptor**

In the following four tables (4-7) each part of the qualifications descriptor of the FHEQ is linked to its appropriate partner component in the relevant Bologna cycle descriptor. The tables show the Dublin descriptor alongside the appropriate FHEQ descriptor, while colour coding illustrates the correlations. These correlations reproduce some of the linkages successfully made in the Scottish self-certification exercise as both the Scottish and EWNl qualifications description share much in common, for example, *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (Scottish FQHE) and the FHEQ level descriptors are identical for master's and doctorates. However, the 2008 edition of the FHEQ has introduced a number of important changes and refinements that are taken into account. Following each table there is additional information and comment to illustrate the correlations.

**Table 4: Links between the FQ-EHEA short cycle descriptors and FHEQ level 5 descriptors (Foundation Degree)**

<p>DUBLIN DESCRIPTOR FOR <b>SHORT CYCLE</b> QUALIFICATIONS - WITHIN OR LINKED TO THE FIRST CYCLE</p>	<p>FHEQ TYPICAL HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATION WITHIN EACH LEVEL                      Descriptor for an EWN I higher education qualification at <b>FHEQ LEVEL 5: FOUNDATION DEGREE</b> (intermediate qualification within the first cycle)</p>
<p>Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education <b>short cycle</b> (within the first cycle) are awarded to students who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle</li> <li>■ can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts</li> <li>■ have the ability to identify and use data to formulate response to well-defined concrete and abstract problems</li> <li>■ can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients</li> <li>■ have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.</li> </ul>	<p>The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any Foundation Degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 5 qualifications, including Diplomas of Higher Education, Higher National Diplomas, etc.</p> <p><b>Foundation Degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed</li> <li>● ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context</li> <li>● knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study</li> <li>● an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.</li> </ul> <p><b>Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis</li> <li>● effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively</li> <li>● undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations.</li> </ul> <p><b>And holders will have:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.</li> </ul>

The FHEQ Foundation Degree is an example of a qualification that meets, in full, the expectations of the qualification descriptor (and the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*).

Holders of qualifications at this level will have developed a sound understanding of the principles in their field of study, and will have learned to apply those principles more widely. Through this, they will have learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems. Their studies may well have had a vocational orientation, for example HNDs, enabling them to perform effectively in their chosen field. Holders of qualifications at this level will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

## **Correlations between the descriptors**

### **Credit values**

The Dublin descriptor indicates that the short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications will have an approximate credit value of 120 ECTS. This is consistent with EWN credit practice where Foundation Degrees have a minimum of 240 credits (equivalent to 120 ECTS credits).

The FHEQ is not a credit framework - further information (including for any FHEQ qualification the overall credit minimum and minimum number of credits at a particular level) on credit correlations can be found in the Credit Issues Development Group (CIDG) *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* and the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*.

### **Main correspondences**

The colour-coded table (table 4) provides a broad indication of the major correlations that can be drawn between the two sets of descriptors. There are direct linkages between: knowledge and understanding; transferable skills applicable to employment; analysis of data and information; communication skills; and the ability to undertake further studies and learning. The two sets of descriptors obviously differ in wording but there exists a very close correlation between them. They are both designed to give access to further studies in order to complete the first cycle.

### **Additional dimensions**

There are several extra dimensions that need to be taken into account when cross-referencing the two sets of descriptors. The FHEQ is just one part of the Academic Infrastructure that also includes subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. In particular, the Foundation Degree qualification benchmark 2004<sup>75</sup> is used in conjunction with the FHEQ qualification descriptor to inform programmes developers.

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<sup>75</sup> This can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/benchmark/fdqpb.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationdegree/benchmark/fdqpb.asp)

**Table 5: Links between the FQ-EHEA first cycle descriptors and FHEQ level 6 descriptors (bachelor's degree with honours)**

DUBLIN DESCRIPTOR FOR <b>FIRST CYCLE</b> AWARDS WITHIN THE OVERARCHING EHEA FRAMEWORK (FQ-EHEA)	FHEQ TYPICAL HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATION WITHIN EACH LEVEL <b>Descriptor for an EWNI higher education qualification at FHEQ LEVEL 6: BACHELOR'S DEGREE WITH HONOURS</b>
<p>Qualifications that signify completion of the <b>first cycle</b> are awarded to students who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study</li> <li>■ can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study</li> <li>■ have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues</li> <li>■ can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences</li> <li>■ have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.</li> </ul> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px; width: fit-content;"> <p>Relates to multiple FQ-EHEA descriptors</p> </div>	<p>The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any bachelor's degree with honours which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 6 qualifications, including bachelor's degrees, graduate diplomas etc.</p> <p><b>Bachelor's Degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline</li> <li>● an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline</li> <li>● conceptual understanding that enables the student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline</li> <li>○ to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline</li> </ul> </li> <li>● an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge</li> <li>● the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).</li> </ul> <p><b>Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects</li> <li>● critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem</li> <li>● communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.</li> </ul> <p><b>And holders will have:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility</li> <li>○ decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts</li> <li>○ the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Holders of an FHEQ bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements and to communicate them effectively.

Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.

Bachelor's degrees with honours form the largest group of higher education qualifications. Typically, learning outcomes for these programmes would be expected to be achieved on the basis of study equivalent to three full-time academic years and lead to awards with titles such as Bachelor of Arts, BA (Hons) or Bachelor of Science, BSc (Hons). In addition to bachelor's degrees at this level are short courses and professional 'conversion' courses, based largely on undergraduate material, and taken usually by those who are already graduates in another discipline, leading to, for example, graduate certificates or graduate diplomas.

## **Correlations between the descriptors**

### **Credit values**

The FQ-EHEA indicates for the first cycle (end of cycle) qualification a 180-240 ECTS range. This is consistent with EWN credit practice where honours bachelor's degrees have a minimum of 360 credits (equivalent to 180 ECTS credits).

The FHEQ is not a credit framework - further information (including for any FHEQ qualification the overall credit minimum and minimum number of credits at a particular level) on credit correlations can be found in the QAA *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* and the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*.

### **Main correspondences**

The colour-coded table (table 5) provides a broad indication of the major correlations that can be drawn between the two sets of descriptors. There are direct linkages between: knowledge and understanding informed by current research; abilities to analyse and problem solve; data and information gathering skills; abilities to communicate information to specialist and non-specialist audiences; and the acquisition of transferable and learning skills appropriate for further study. The FHEQ descriptors offer more detail and precision and some interface with several FQ-EHEA descriptors. There is a close set of correlations between the two sets of descriptors. Both sets of descriptors establish access to the second cycle studies and emphasise knowledge and skills relevant to employment.

### Additional dimensions

There are several extra dimensions that need to be taken into account when cross-referencing the two sets of descriptors. The FHEQ is just one part of the Academic Infrastructure that also includes subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. In particular, the subject benchmark statements for bachelor's degrees with honours act as an important reference point.<sup>76</sup>

Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. Currently there are 54 subject benchmark statements for bachelor's degrees with honours which are all regularly reviewed and updated. These subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated.

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<sup>76</sup> This can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours)

**Table 6: Links between FQ-EHEA second cycle descriptors and FHEQ level 7 descriptors (master's degree)**

DUBLIN DESCRIPTOR FOR SECOND CYCLE AWARDS WITHIN THE OVERARCHING EHEA FRAMEWORK (FQ-EHEA)	FHEQ TYPICAL HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATION WITHIN EACH LEVEL Descriptor for an EWNI higher education qualification at FHEQ LEVEL 7: MASTER'S DEGREE
<p>Qualifications that signify completion of the second cycle are awarded to students who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context</li> <li>■ can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multi-disciplinary) contexts related to their field of study</li> <li>■ have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements</li> <li>■ can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously</li> <li>■ have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.</li> </ul> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Relates to multiple FQ-EHEA descriptors</p> </div>	<p>The descriptor provided for this level of the framework is for any master's degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 7 qualifications, including postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas.</p> <p><b>Master's degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice</li> <li>● a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship</li> <li>● originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline</li> <li>● conceptual understanding that enables the student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline</li> <li>○ to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences</li> <li>● demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level</li> <li>● continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.</li> </ul> <p><b>And holders will have:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility</li> <li>○ decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations</li> <li>○ the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Much of the study undertaken for a FHEQ master's degrees will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Students will have shown originality in the application of knowledge, and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They will be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they will show originality in tackling and solving problems. They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

Master's degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses, programmes of research or a mixture of both. Longer, research-based programmes may lead to the degree of MPhil. The learning outcomes of most master's degree courses are achieved on the basis of study equivalent to at least one full-time calendar year and are taken by graduates with a bachelor's degree with honours (or equivalent achievement).

Master's degrees are often distinguished from other qualifications at this level (for example, advanced short courses, which often form parts of continuing professional development programmes and lead to postgraduate certificates and/or postgraduate diplomas) by an increased intensity, complexity and density of study. Master's degrees - in comparison to postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas - typically include planned intellectual progression that often includes a synoptic/research or scholarly activity.

Some master's degrees, for example in science, engineering, pharmacy and mathematics, comprise an integrated programme of study spanning several levels where the outcomes are normally achieved through study equivalent to four full-time academic years. While the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves meet the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7 in full, such qualifications are often termed 'integrated master's' as an acknowledgement of the additional period of study at lower levels (which typically meets the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6).

First degrees in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science comprise an integrated programme of study and professional practice spanning several levels. While the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves typically meet the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7, these qualifications may often retain, for historical reasons, titles of Bachelor of Medicine, and Bachelor of Surgery, Bachelor of Dental Surgery, Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine or Bachelor of Veterinary Science, and are abbreviated to MBChB or BM BS, BDS, BVetMed and BVSc respectively.

#### Note

The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are not academic qualifications. The MA is normally granted, on application, to graduates of these universities with a Bachelor of Arts (BA). No further study or assessment is required, but the recipient may be required to pay a fee. At the University of Oxford, the MA may be granted during or after the twenty-first term from matriculation and at the University of Cambridge, the MA may be granted six years after the end of the first term. Both Oxford and Cambridge also offer a range of master's degree programmes which do lead to academic qualifications and which are differentiated by a different qualification title (for example, MPhil).

## Correlations between the descriptors

### Credit values

The FQ-EHEA indicates for the second cycle, end of cycle qualifications, a minimum credit requirement of 60 ECTS credits; however a range of 90-120 ECTS credits is more typical at second cycle level. This is consistent with EWNI credit practice where master's degrees have a minimum number of 180 EWNI credits (equivalent to 90 ECTS credits).

In the case of four-year integrated master's degrees these have a minimum number of 120 EWNI credits at the level of the second cycle (FHEQ level 7). This is equivalent to 60 ECTS credits which is consistent with the Bologna guidelines.

The FHEQ is not a credit framework - further information (including for any FHEQ qualification the overall credit minimum and minimum number of credits at a particular level) on credit correlations can be found in the QAA *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* and the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*.

### Main correspondences

The colour-coded table (table 6) provides a broad indication of the major correlations that can be drawn between the two sets of descriptors. There are direct linkages between: the required levels of knowledge, understanding and research; application of knowledge; advanced scholarship, use appropriate methodology and making judgments; communicating conclusions; and ability to act with self direction and autonomy. The FHEQ descriptors offer more detail and precision and some interface with several FQ-EHEA descriptors. There is a close set of correlations between the two sets of descriptors. Both establish access the third cycle studies and include a vocational dimension.

### Additional dimensions

There are several extra dimensions that need to be taken into account when cross-referencing the two sets of descriptors. The FHEQ is just one part of the 'Academic Infrastructure' that also includes subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the QAA *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. In particular, the subject benchmark statements act as an important reference point. Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated. Currently there are eight sets of master's benchmark statements.<sup>77</sup>

These describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject. QAA has also held a number of round table discussion meetings focused on M level benchmark statements. In addition, the QAA *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, which covers research master's degrees, informs programme developers and those responsible for internal and external quality assurance.

<sup>77</sup> These can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/masters](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/masters)

**Table 7: Links between FQ-EHEA third cycle descriptors and FHEQ level 8 descriptors (doctoral degrees)**

<p>DUBLIN DESCRIPTOR FOR <b>THIRD CYCLE</b> AWARDS WITHIN THE OVERARCHING EHEA FRAMEWORK (FQ-EHEA)</p>	<p>FHEQ TYPICAL HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATION WITHIN EACH LEVEL Descriptor for an EwNI higher education qualification at <b>FHEQ LEVEL 8: DOCTORAL DEGREE</b></p>
<p>Qualifications that signify completion of the <b>third cycle</b> are awarded to students who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field</li> <li>■ have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity</li> <li>■ have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication</li> <li>■ are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas</li> <li>■ can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise</li> <li>■ can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.</li> </ul> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 20px; width: fit-content;"> <p>Relates to multiple FQ-EHEA descriptors</p> </div>	<p>The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any doctoral degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 8 qualifications.</p> <p><b>Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline and merit publication</li> <li>● a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice</li> <li>● the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems</li> <li>● a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.</li> </ul> <p><b>Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences</li> <li>● continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.</li> </ul> <p><b>And holders will have:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.</li> </ul>

FHEQ doctoral degrees are awarded for the creation and interpretation, construction and/or exposition of knowledge which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research.

Holders of doctoral degrees will be able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Holders of doctoral degrees will have the qualities needed for employment that require both the ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields and an innovative approach to tackling and solving problems.

Doctoral programmes that may include a research component but which have a substantial taught element (for example, professional doctorates), lead usually to awards which include the name of the discipline in their title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education or DClinPsy for Doctor of Clinical Psychology). Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge.

The titles PhD and DPhil are commonly used for doctoral degrees awarded on the basis of original research.

Achievement of outcomes consistent with the qualification descriptor for the doctoral degree normally requires study equivalent to three full-time calendar years.

Higher doctorates may be awarded in recognition of a substantial body of original research undertaken over the course of many years. Typically a portfolio of work which has been previously published in a peer-refereed context is submitted for assessment. Most higher education awarding bodies restrict candidacy to graduates or academic staff of several years' standing.

**Note:**

Honorary doctoral degrees are not academic qualifications.

## **Correlations between the descriptors**

### **Credit values**

Credit ranges for third cycle doctoral degrees are not indicated in the FQ-EHEA or the FHEQ.

The FHEQ is not a credit framework - further information (including for any FHEQ qualification the overall credit minimum and minimum number of credits at a particular level) on credit correlations can be found in the QAA *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* and the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*.

Some EWNl institutions have credit-based professional doctorates. The chart reproduced as table 3 in this report illustrates the situation for England, and is also true for Wales and Northern Ireland.

### Main correspondences

The colour-coded table (table 7) provides a broad indication of the major correlations that can be drawn between the two sets of descriptors. There are direct linkages between: systematic understanding and mastery of substantial knowledge; the ability to conceive, design and implement research; advancing knowledge and scholarship by original research; possession of advanced skills of critical analysis and academic enquiry; and communication and other transferable skills in professional and academic contexts. There is a close set of correlations between the two sets of descriptors. The FHEQ descriptors offer more detail and precision and some interface with several FQ-EHEA descriptors.

### Additional dimensions

There are several extra dimensions that need to be taken into account when cross-referencing the two sets of descriptors. The FHEQ is just one part of the 'Academic Infrastructure'. In particular, the QAA *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, informs programme developers and those responsible for internal and external quality assurance.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> This can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice)

## Appendix F: Letters from Bill Rammell MP and Judith Cole



Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT  
tel: 0870 0012345 dfes.ministers@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

**Bill Rammell MP**

**Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education**

Mr Peter Williams  
Chief Executive  
Quality Assurance Agency  
Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Date: 20 March 2007

Dear Peter

I am writing to ask you, as Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), to take forward the task of self-certification of the framework of higher education qualifications (FHEQ) against the overarching framework of qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

As you will know, the Bergen Ministerial conference in 2005 led to the adoption of a Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA. Countries participating in the process committed themselves to implementing national qualifications frameworks that were compatible with that overarching framework. Whilst there is a framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, no formal verification exercise has yet been undertaken to show whether it is compatible with the EHEA framework.

As one of the initiators of the Bologna process, I am clear that the UK should continue to demonstrate its commitment to the process and seek all opportunities to take action to implement the action lines. In the case of the FHEQ, we have been unable to take action to date because in England there is currently no national credit system and the EHEA framework, as well as having a strong focus on learning outcomes in the descriptors, has associated guidance on credit. However, following the publication of the Burgess report and the recommendation that we should develop a national credit framework, I believe that the time is right to undertake in tandem the self-certification of our higher education qualifications framework. Self-certification would not only provide a positive demonstration of our commitment to the Bologna process, it will also enhance the international recognition of our qualifications.

Given the QAA's role in developing the framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, your organisation is clearly best placed to lead on this exercise, although you will obviously need to work in partnership with other bodies, such as Universities UK, the HE Europe Unit, GuildHE and UKNARIC. You should also note that Northern Ireland has asked to be part of this exercise. I would ask you therefore to liaise with the Department of Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland in taking forward this work. I understand that the Welsh Assembly will be

department for  
**education and skills**  
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

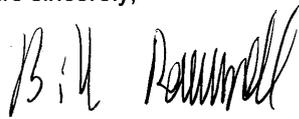


INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

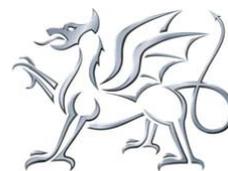
contacting you separately about undertaking a similar exercise for Wales in parallel with ours.

I therefore wish to ask you to assist us, by incorporating this exercise into your work programme for the next year, with a view to completing the self-certification of the framework of higher education qualifications by November 2008. This would then allow us to report before the next Bologna stocktaking exercise in December 2008 on the progress that we have made.

Yours sincerely,



**BILL RAMMELL MP**



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government

Mr Peter Williams  
Chief Executive  
Quality Assurance Agency  
Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Eich cyf \* Your ref  
Ein cyf \* Our ref

02 November 2007

November 2007

I wrote to you earlier this year to ask the QAA to undertake the self-certification of the Welsh Assembly Government's higher education qualifications framework: the Curriculum and Qualification Framework for Wales (CQFW). This followed Bill Rammell MP's letter to you of 20 March, requesting that the QAA undertake the self-certification process of England's framework of higher education qualifications (FHEQ) against the overarching framework of the European Higher Education Area.

Key HE sector partners in Wales met in June to discuss the feasibility of CQFW being certified against the EHEA qualifications framework via the Bologna Self-certification process. As with the SCQF, the CQFW is an integrated framework, encompassing both Further and Higher Education. We have therefore decided that it would be preferable for Wales to join the process that the QAA is taking forward for England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2008.

I understand that the QAA met in Cardiff on 17 July to discuss the proposed review and revision of the FHEQ, and that Higher Education Wales (HEW) will nominate a representative to join the QAA's advisory group that is overseeing the work. Our colleagues in HEFCW and Rachel Mooney in the Welsh Assembly Government's Department for Education, Welsh Language and Culture (Tel: 01443 663873; email Rachel.mooney@wales.gsi.gov.uk) will be happy to offer every assistance with the self-certification process.



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I know that your colleagues have already been proceeding very helpfully on this basis and I am sorry for this very late confirmation from me. I am copying to Carolyn Campbell at QAA and to Rachel Mooney here.

Yours sincerely

Judith Cole  
HE impact  
Higher Education Division  
Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

Yours sincerely

Judith Cole

## Appendix G: Glossary of abbreviations

ACCAC	Qualifications Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales
APCL	Accreditation of prior certificated learning
APEL	Accreditation of prior experiential learning
APL	Accreditation of prior learning
CCEA	Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment in Northern Ireland
CIDG	Credit Issues Development Group
CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
DAPs	Degree awarding powers
DELNI	Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
Edexcel	Edexcel is an awarding body and for-profit organisation offering academic and vocational qualifications and testing to schools, colleges and employers
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENIC	European Network of Information Centres
EQF	European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education
EWNI	England, Wales and Northern Ireland
FHEQ	<i>The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland</i>
FQ-EHEA	<i>The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area</i>
FQHE	<i>The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland</i>
GuildHE	Formerly the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) - one of the two formal representative bodies for higher education in the UK
HECIW	Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HERO	Higher Education and Research Opportunities - the official gateway to universities, colleges and research organisations in the UK
HEW	Higher Education Wales
HNC	Higher National Certificate - a work-related qualification and often studied part-time by students in employment
HND	Higher National Diploma - a work-related qualification of two years' full-time duration
JQI	Joint Quality Initiative
LLNs	Lifelong Learning Networks
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre
NICATS	Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System

NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NUCCAT	Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
PSRBs	Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
QCF	Qualifications and Credit Framework
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SEEC	Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admission Service
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs - the UK national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them
UUK	Universities UK - one of the two formal representative bodies for higher education in the UK
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government
WHECC	Welsh Higher Education Credit Consortium

## Appendix H: References and further information sources

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## Appendix I: Chronology of implementation, review and revision of the FHEQ

Event	Date	Notes
Publication of second edition FHEQ	28 August 2008	
Written consultation on second edition FHEQ	11 April - 6 June 2008	Open consultation on draft second edition
Roundtable discussion with higher education sector and stakeholders	London - 28 Nov 2007	Consultation on initial draft second edition
	Cardiff - 26 Nov 2007	
	Manchester - 13 Nov 2007	
	London - 20 July 2007	Progress and challenges in implementing the FHEQ
	Cardiff - 17 July 2007	
	Manchester - 26 June 2007	
Advisory Group meetings		
	23 June 2008	Advisory Group comprised higher education sector representative bodies, practitioners and student representatives
	13 March 2008	
	23 January 2008	
	17 September 2007	
	6 August 2007	
Publication of <i>Outcomes from institutional audit - the adoption and use of learning outcomes</i>	May 2007	Paper based on a review of the outcomes of the 70 institutional audit reports published by 5 November 2004
Publication of <i>Outcomes from institutional audit - the FHEQ</i>	July 2006	Paper based on a review of the outcomes of the 70 institutional audit reports published by 5 November 2004
FHEQ roundtable discussion with higher education sector and stakeholders	Manchester - 4 April 2003	Progress and challenges in implementing the FHEQ
	Leicester - 11 March 2003	
Publication of first edition FHEQ	January 2001	

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