

## SPICe Briefing

# Higher Education: Qualifications, Quality Assurance and Assessment

27 September 2010

10/61

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This briefing provides an overview of the range of higher education qualifications on offer in Scotland, including a description of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). It summaries assessment and quality assurance procedures in higher education for Scotland's colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including the work of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe). Finally, the role of the Scottish Funding Council and the 'Quality Enhancement Framework for Scotland' are explained.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A range of higher education (HE) qualifications are offered by Scottish Colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). [The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#) sets out the relationships between levels of qualification. It covers the mainstream qualifications offered by the [Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\)](#), HEIs and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). Higher education courses start from SCQF level 7 and above
- In 2008-2009, there were 279,615 students in higher education. Of these, 83% studied HE courses in HEIs and the remaining 17% studied HE in colleges. The vast majority of first degree and postgraduate students studied in HEIs. Conversely, the majority of students at HNC/HND level studied in college
- HEIs are autonomous institutions that can award their own degrees, postgraduate diplomas and certificates, if they have been granted 'degree awarding powers'. Institutions can be granted the power to award taught degrees, research degrees, or both. If an HEI does not have powers to award its own degrees, validation and accreditation is undertaken by a partner institution. Colleges do not have degree awarding powers. Degrees studied for at a Scottish college are validated by a partner HEI. Twenty five of the 43 colleges in Scotland offer HE courses at degree level or above
- The power of HEIs to award degrees is regulated by law and it is an offence for an institution to offer degrees without authorisation to do so. Degree awarding powers are generally granted either by Royal Charter or an Act of Parliament. Applications for taught or research degree-awarding powers and/or university title must be made to the UK Privy Council. The Privy Council forwards the application to the relevant Minister with higher education responsibilities. The application is then sent to the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA) for advice. The QAA offers confidential guidance on the application, through the appropriate Minister, to the Privy Council (QAA)
- HEIs enjoy a considerable degree of independence in terms of quality control and academic standards. Each HEI is responsible for the standards of the qualifications it offers and the quality of education it provides to its students. Each has its own internal quality assurance procedures and each institution's governing body is responsible for overseeing quality assurance and enhancement. However, all publicly funded HEIs in the UK use a common set of tools for maintaining their academic quality and standards, known as the UK Academic Infrastructure (Universities UK, 2008) and they are externally checked by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
- Many of the courses offered by colleges lead to qualifications awarded by the [Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\)](#), including Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). The SQA is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) in Scotland, sponsored by the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate. It is responsible for the development, accreditation, assessment and certification of qualifications other than degrees

- As with the QAA for HEIs, the SFC has a service level agreement with HMIE to carry out external reviews of quality arrangements of Scotland's colleges, within 4-year cycle.
- The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 places a statutory duty on the SFC to maintain and enhance the quality of the provision of education that it funds. The SFC's [Corporate plan 2009-12](#) 'Outcome 7: Effective Colleges and Universities' outlines the Council's actions in relation to quality. The SFC's [Quality, Equalities and General Purposes Committee](#) is responsible for overseeing the SFC's statutory function to ensure provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of further and higher education provided by publicly funded institutions.
- In 2003, a major review of arrangements for quality assurance in learning and teaching in Scotland was undertaken and the SFC, along with other stakeholders, developed a 'Quality Enhancement Framework' (QEF) for Scotland. This framework has 5 parts aimed at making continuous improvements to the quality of learning and teaching (SFC, 2008a). It was originally developed for HEIs but later extended to apply to colleges
- The QEF was revised in 2008 and all universities and colleges in Scotland were asked to provide a 'baseline statement' on their quality assurance policies and procedures for 2008-09 (SFC, 2009a). The SFC then issued new guidance on quality issues to both sectors
- Following revision of the Quality Enhancement Framework in 2008, a new set of [external quality review arrangements](#) for colleges has been introduced by the SFC and HMIE, for the period 2008-12 (HMIE, 2008)
- The current quality enhancement cycle for the FE and HE sector will last until the end of the academic year (AY) 2011-12. The SFC proposes to carry out a review of quality arrangements in AY 2010-11, with a view to having the revised model ready to start in August 2012. The proposed review will look at both the HE and FE sectors
- The QAA, along with key higher education organisations, is currently evaluating the UK Academic Infrastructure to determine if it is still fit for purpose. It is intended that the findings will be published in summer 2010, which will include recommendations for its future development.

# HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS

## The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

A range of higher education (HE) qualifications is offered by Scottish Colleges and HEIs. [The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#) sets out the relationships between levels of qualification. It covers the mainstream qualifications offered by the [Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\)](#), HEIs and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). The SCQF is managed in partnership by the SQA, [QAA Scotland](#), [Universities Scotland](#), [Scotland's Colleges](#), the [Scottish Funding Council \(SFC\)](#) and the Scottish Government. It helps learners, employers and training providers to understand and compare qualifications, by using 2 measures: the 'level' of a qualification, and the number of 'credit points' awarded for that qualification.

The 'level' of a qualification measures the complexity of a course. The SCQF has 12 'levels', intended to reflect the Scottish education system, and provides a broad comparison of qualifications and learning achieved in different environments, such as the workplace, college or university. These levels range from Access SCQF level 1 to SCQF level 12. Higher education courses start from SCQF level 7 (excluding advanced highers) reaching SCQF level 12.

The number of 'credit points' for a qualification is based on the amount of time that an 'average' learner studying at the appropriate level might take to achieve the outcome of that course. One SCQF credit point represents 10 hours of learning time. Most mainstream qualifications in Scotland have been allocated a certain number of credit points. An Honours Degree in Scotland has a total of 480 credits, with at least 90 credits at SCQF level 10 (SCQF, 2010). The identification of 'credit' as well as 'qualification' allows individuals to accumulate credit by part-time as well as full-time study towards qualifications as well as identifying specific educational achievements. The SCQF table of main qualifications can be seen in figure 1 below. For further detail on the SCQF levels and what learning outcomes are achieved at each level, please see the [SCQF level descriptors](#).

Figure 1: The SCQF

**THE SCOTTISH CREDIT AND QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK**

scqf scottish credit and qualifications framework

SCQF Levels	SQA Qualifications		Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions	Scottish Vocational Qualifications
12			DOCTORAL DEGREE	
11			INTEGRATED MASTERS DEGREE / MASTERS DEGREE POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA POST GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	SVQ5
10			HONOURS DEGREE GRADUATE DIPLOMA GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	
9			BACHELORS / ORDINARY DEGREE GRADUATE DIPLOMA GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	SVQ4
8		HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA	DIPLOMA OF HIGHER EDUCATION	
7	ADVANCED HIGHER	HIGHER NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	CERTIFICATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION	SVQ3
6	HIGHER			
5	INTERMEDIATE 2 CREDIT STANDARD GRADE			SVQ2
4	INTERMEDIATE 1 GENERAL STANDARD GRADE	NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	NATIONAL PROGRESSION AWARD	SVQ1
3	ACCESS 3 FOUNDATION STANDARD GRADE			
2	ACCESS 2			
1	ACCESS 1			

HE courses above SCQF Level 7 include:

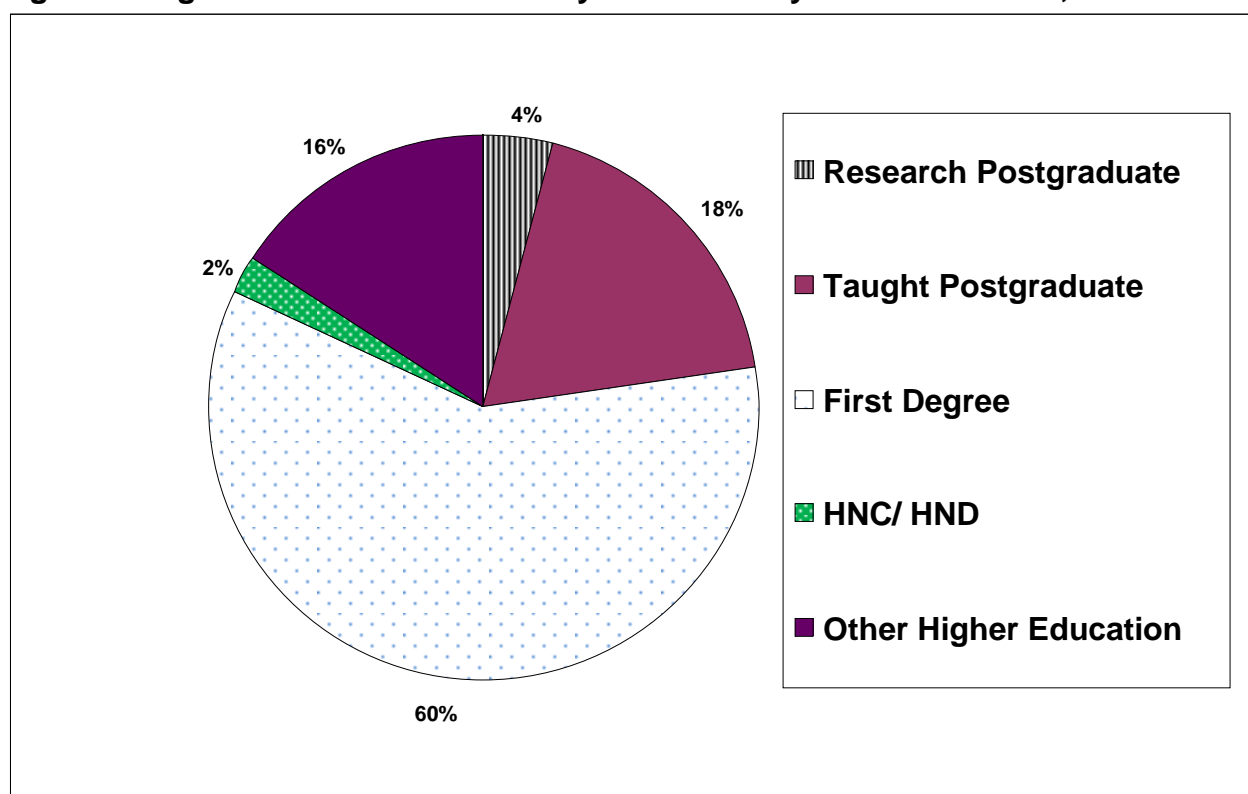
- Higher National Certificates and Diplomas <http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/168.2432.html>
- Certificates and Diplomas in Higher Education
- Graduate Diplomas and Certificates
- First Degrees<sup>1</sup>
- Postgraduate Degrees including Masters and Doctorates

In 2008-2009, there were 279,615 students in higher education. Of these, 83% studied HE courses in HEIs and the remaining 17% studied HE in colleges. It can be seen from table 1 and figures 2 and 3 below that the level of study in these two types of institution differs greatly. The vast majority of first degree and postgraduate students studied in HEIs, with only 680 students studying first degrees and 100 students studying taught postgraduate degrees at college (The 100 students studying postgraduate level courses are at colleges that are part of the UHI Millennium Institute). Conversely, the majority of students at HNC/HND level studied in college (Scottish Government, 2010a).

**Table 1: Students in Higher Education, by level of study 2008-09**

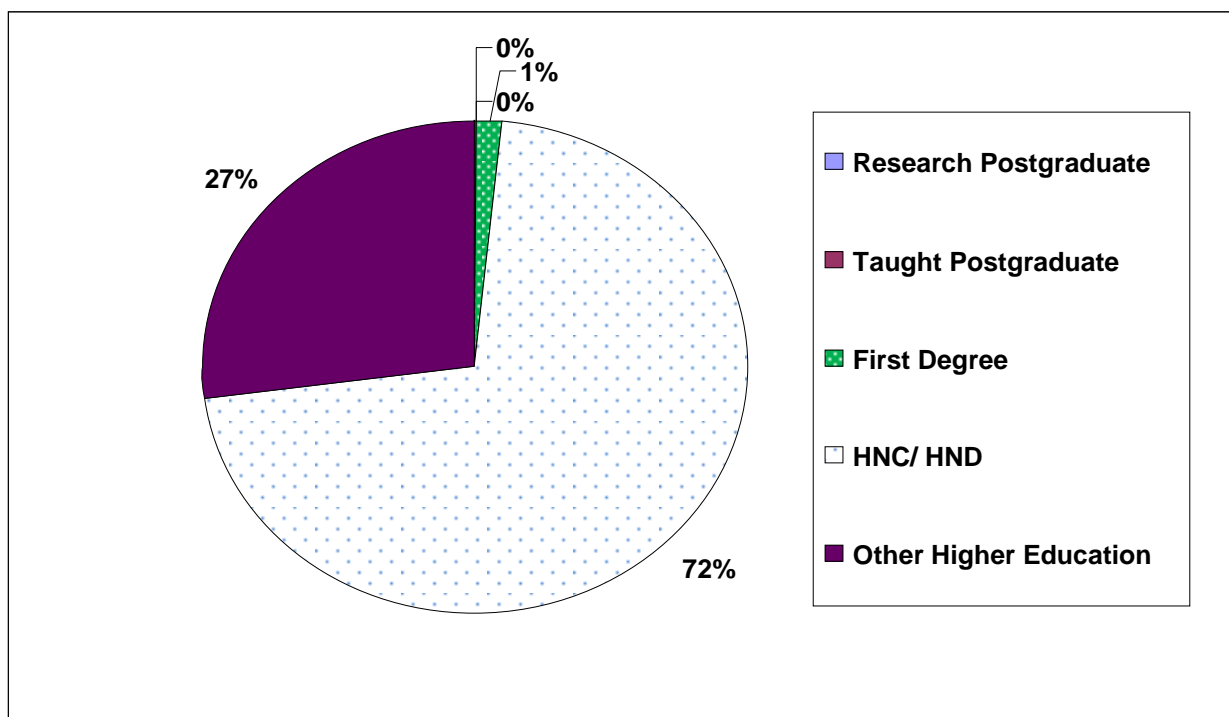
	All Levels	Level of Study				
		Postgraduate		First Degree	Other Undergraduate	
		Research Postgraduate	Taught Postgraduate	First Degree	HNC/HND	Other Higher Education
<b>HEIs</b>	<b>231,260</b>	9,935	42,660	137,040	4,745	36,875
<b>Colleges</b>	<b>48,355</b>	0	100	680	34,360	13,175

**Figure 2: Higher education students by level of study at Scottish HEIs, 2008-09**



<sup>1</sup> Undergraduate (first degree) students may obtain an Ordinary degree after three academic years of study and an Honours degree after four years of study. Some courses such as Law and Medicine may require longer periods of study and may involve a professional work experience placement (Scottish Executive, 2005b).

**Figure 3: Higher Education students by level of study at Scottish Colleges, 2008-09**



(Scottish Government, 2010a).

### **The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**

In 2006, the European Commission adopted a proposal for the establishment of the [European Qualifications Framework](#) for lifelong learning (EQF). The EQF was formally adopted by the European Parliament and the European Council on 23 April 2008 (European Commission, 2010). The EQF aims to support the movement of learners across Europe by providing a reference point for comparing qualifications across different education and training systems and to strengthen co-operation and mutual trust between the relevant stakeholders (European Commission, 2006).

The EQF is a set of 8 levels which describe what a learner knows, understands and is able to do, known as their 'learning outcomes'. Qualification Frameworks of individual countries can then be aligned with these 8 reference levels to classify qualifications from different education systems. The 8 levels cover all qualifications from the end of compulsory education to the highest academic and professional qualifications.

The EQF is intended to help improve EU geographic and occupational mobility as qualifications from different education systems become more transparent to individuals, employers, academics and training providers. This should help make lifelong learning more accessible to learners and workers across EU Member states, supporting individuals to move between jobs and education institutions. EU countries have been encouraged to relate their qualifications systems to the EQF by 2010 and to ensure that all new qualifications issued from 2012 are referenced to the appropriate EQF level (European Commission, 2010). The SCQF has been working with the UK EQF co-ordination group, to map Scottish and other UK qualifications to the EQF. The resulting [SCQF report referencing UK qualification Frameworks to the EQF](#) was published in December 2009 and updated in March 2010 (SCQF 2010).

The alignment of the SCQF to the EQF can be seen in figure 4 below. Scottish HE courses would be the equivalent of at least EQF level 5. An Honours Degree in Scotland (SCQF level 10) is the equivalent of achieving EQF level 6. Masters and Postgraduate Diplomas and



Certificates (PGDips and PGCs) are equal to EQF level 7, whilst doctorates (PHDs) are referenced to EQF level 8.

**Figure 4: The EQF**

SCQF	EQF	Summary
12	8	SCQF Levels 11 and 12 can be confidently referenced to EQF Levels 7 and 8.
11	7	
10	6	SCQF Level 10 can be confidently referenced to EQF Level 6.
9	6	While SCQF Level 9 is intended to be more demanding than EQF Level 5, it may not reference fully to EQF Level 6 in terms of the language of the descriptors. It is agreed, however, that SCQF Level 9 should be referenced to EQF Level 6.
8	5	SCQF Level 8 can be confidently referenced to EQF Level 5.
7	5	For SCQF Level 7, it is difficult to employ 'best fit' on the basis of an analysis of the descriptors alone. However, it is agreed that SCQF Level 7 should be referenced to EQF Level 5.
6	4	SCQF Levels 3-6 can be confidently referenced to EQF Levels 1-4.
5	3	
4	2	
3	1	
2		SCQF Level 2 can be referenced to EQF Level 1 only in some domains. This partial matching was not typical of other levels. Considering the intention of the SCQF level and the extent to which referencing is not possible, it is agreed that SCQF Level 2 should not be referenced to the EQF.
1		There are no grounds for referencing SCQF Level 1 to the EQF.

(European Commission, 2010)



## ASSESSMENT AND AWARD OF HE QUALIFICATIONS

HEIs are autonomous institutions that can award their own degrees, postgraduate diplomas and certificates, if they have been granted 'degree awarding powers'. Institutions can be granted the power to award taught degrees, research degrees, or both. If an HEI does not have powers to award its own degrees, validation and accreditation is undertaken by a partner institution. For further detail on degree awarding powers, see box 1 below.

### Box 1: Degree Awarding Powers in Scotland's HEIs

The power of HEIs to award degrees is regulated by law and it is an offence for an institution to offer degrees without authorisation to do so. Degree awarding powers are generally granted either by Royal Charter or an Act of Parliament (A Royal Charter is a way of incorporating a body, turning it from a collection of individuals into a single legal entity. A body incorporated by Royal Charter has all the powers of a natural person, including the power to sue and be sued in its own right – UK Privy Council, 2010).

**Scotland's 4 ancient universities** (St Andrews, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh) were constituted under the Universities (Scotland) Acts 1858 to 1966. The Universities of St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen were founded by decree of the pope (papal bull). The University of Edinburgh was established by the town council (SPICe, 2002).

**Pre-1992 'chartered' universities** of Stirling, Dundee, Heriot-Watt and Strathclyde were founded in the 1960s and operate under Royal Charter which set out the universities' constitutions, statutes, and how they operate. The Open University was established by Royal Charter on 23 April 1969. Royal Charters are granted (and amended) by the Sovereign on the advice of the [UK Privy Council](#). The Privy Council also appoints some of the members of governing bodies of older universities, although this responsibility is being phased out (UK Privy Council, 2010). Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, the UK Privy Council was made responsible for approving 'full university title' (being able to use the word 'University' in the name of an institution)

**Scottish post-1992 HEIs** (those gaining university status under the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 – Glasgow Caledonian, Robert Gordon, Paisley (now merged to form the University of the West of Scotland) Abertay (which became a university in 1994) and Edinburgh Napier) operate under legal documents that set out the constitution, operational and governance arrangements of the institution. These documents are subject to Scottish Statutory Instruments as provided for by the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 and also need approval from the UK Privy Council. In addition, Queen Margaret University was awarded full university title in 2007.

**The UHI Millennium Institute** was given the power to award taught degrees in 2008 and is still seeking the powers to award research degrees and achieve full university status. On 30 August 2010, the Scottish Government issued a [consultation seeking views on the award of University Title to the UHI Millennium Institute](#) (Scottish Government, 2010b). The consultation closes on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2010 and the Scottish Government aims to issue a report on the consultation's findings by 14 February 2011. Currently, some UHI degrees are validated and awarded by the University of Aberdeen, University of Strathclyde and the Open University, and are delivered through a network of colleges and learning centres throughout the Highlands and Islands. Seven of these colleges are delivering degree programmes that will be accredited through the UHI and its partner HEIs. These colleges are: Inverness College UHI, Lews Castle College UHI, Moray College UHI, North Highland College UHI, Orkney College UHI, Perth College UHI and Sabhal Mor Ostaig (UHI Online).

**The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD)** also has the power to award its own taught undergraduate degrees. Its PhD and MPhil degrees are validated and awarded by the University of St Andrews

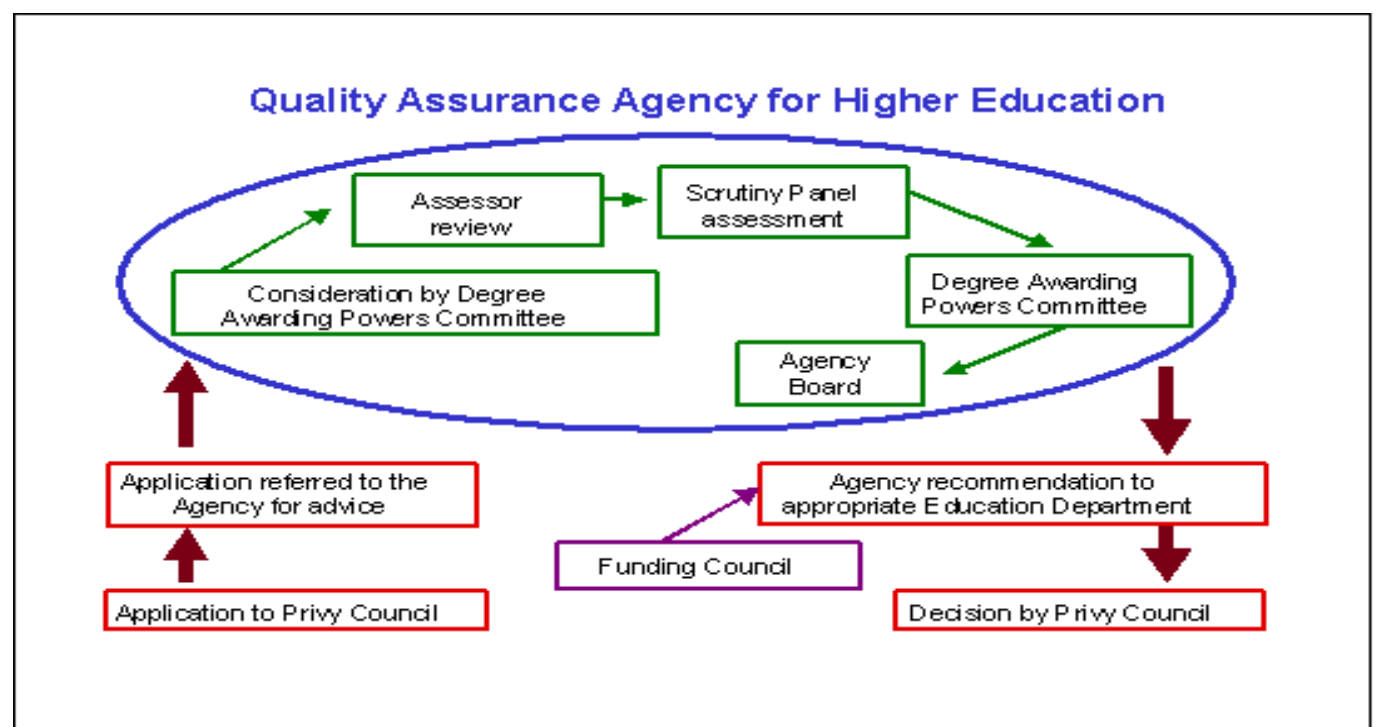
**Three of the 20 HEIs in Scotland do not have the power to award their own degrees.**

These are: Edinburgh College of Art (all of its degree programmes are validated and awarded by the University of Edinburgh), Glasgow School of Art (degrees and validated and awarded by the University of Glasgow) and the Scottish Agricultural College (degrees validated and awarded by the University of Glasgow or Edinburgh dependent on course type)

The Role of the Privy Council and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

Applications for taught or research degree-awarding powers and/or university title must be made to the UK Privy Council. The Privy Council forwards the application to the relevant Minister with higher education responsibilities. The application is then sent to the QAA for advice. The QAA offers confidential guidance on the application, through the appropriate Minister, to the Privy Council (QAA). The criteria used by the QAA for determining if an institution should be granted degree awarding powers are set by Government and cover themes such as organisational governance and management, quality assurance and academic standards, the arrangements for supporting student learning, staffing, and the organisation's administrative infrastructure. These criteria were established in 1999 and are still current in Scotland and Northern Ireland. HEIs in Scotland (and Northern Ireland) have to gain both taught-degree and research-degree awarding powers before they can apply for full university title (this is no longer the case in England and Wales, new criteria were applied to these home nations in 2004). The Scottish Funding Council is also involved in the application process for Scottish HEIs, advising the UK Privy Council (through the Scottish Minister) on the financial arrangements of the applicant institution.

Further detail on the application process and criteria for achieving university status can be accessed from the QAA's [Guidance for Applicant Institutions in Scotland and Northern Ireland](#) (QAA, 1999).



Source: QAA online

## Assessment Procedures in HEIs

As explained above, universities are their own degree awarding bodies. All HEIs have regulations for the assessment of their students' work. These regulations are based on the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's [Code of Practice](#), part of the 'UK Academic Infrastructure' (explained below). HEIs also have internal and external 'moderation' policies. This is to ensure that the standard of students' work is being examined in a fair and consistent manner across institutions. For external moderation, HEIs use a network of external examiners, who are independent academic experts, to advise on whether the standards a university sets and the examination marks it allocates are appropriate (Universities UK, 2008). External examiners do this by using their experience of other HEIs standards for comparison, and by referring to the relevant guidelines from the UK Academic Infrastructure.

Provision and assessment of HE by each HEI is subject to quality control through a combination of internal and external review. These quality assurance processes are explained in detail in the next section.

## Assessment and Award of HE Qualifications in Scotland's Colleges

HE is also delivered in Scotland's Colleges. In 2008-09, 17% of HE students studied in college. The vast majority of those HE students were studying at HNC or HND level. HNCs and HNDs do not fall within the remit of the QAA. These qualifications are validated and accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Colleges in Scotland gain approval from the SQA to assess and award these qualifications. For further information on the role of the SQA, please see box 2 below.

In 2008-09, approximately 800 HE students in Scotland's colleges were studying at first degree level or above. Colleges in Scotland do not have degree awarding powers, so degrees and postgraduate courses delivered in colleges are validated and accredited by partner universities. At the time of writing, 25 of the 43 colleges in Scotland provide HE courses at ordinary degree level or above. This includes the 7 colleges that are partners of the UHI Millennium Institute. The remaining 18 colleges have their degree programmes accredited by the following universities:

<b>Colleges Teaching Degree Programmes</b>	<b>Accrediting Partner University</b>
Adam Smith	University of Abertay Dundee, Heriot Watt University
Angus	Robert Gordon University
Ayr	University of the West of Scotland
Carnegie	Edinburgh Napier University
Coatbridge	University of the West of Scotland
Cumbernauld	University of the West of Scotland
Dundee	Heriot Watt University, Northumbria University
Edinburgh Telford	Northumbria University
Forth Valley	Open University
Glasgow Metropolitan	Glasgow Caledonian University
James Watt	Edinburgh Napier University, Northumbria University, University of Strathclyde
Kilmarnock College	University of the West of Scotland
Motherwell	Robert Gordon University, Northumbria University, Strathclyde University and Edinburgh Napier University
North Glasgow College	Leeds Metropolitan University

Colleges Teaching Degree Programmes	Accrediting Partner University
Reid Kerr College	(courses still awaiting validation at September 2010)
South Lanarkshire College	University of the West of Scotland
Stow College	University of the West of Scotland
West Lothian College	Edinburgh Napier University

## Box 2: The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

Many of the courses offered by colleges lead to qualifications awarded by the [Scottish Qualifications Authority](#) (SQA), including Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). The SQA is an NDPB in Scotland, sponsored by the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate. It is responsible for the development, accreditation, assessment and certification of qualifications other than degrees.

The SQA's functions are set out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1996, as amended by the Scottish Qualifications Act 2002 (SQA, 2010). They are to:

- devise, develop and validate qualifications, and keep them under review
- accredit qualifications
- approve education and training establishments as being suitable for entering people for these qualifications
- arrange for, assist in, and carry out the assessment of people taking SQA qualifications
- quality assure education and training establishments which offer SQA qualifications
- issue certificates to candidates

The qualifications accredited by SQA include:

- [National Qualifications \(including Standard Grades, National Units and courses at Access, Intermediate, Higher and Advanced Higher levels\)](#)
- [Higher National Certificates and Diplomas \(HNC/HND\)](#)
- [Scottish Vocational Qualifications \(SVQs\)](#)
- [Customised awards](#)
- [Professional Development Awards](#)

The SQA has responsibility for approving centres to offer qualifications and for moderating their assessments. It devolves responsibility for approval to centres which demonstrate that they have the necessary capability. When a centre has this responsibility (as most of the colleges do) SQA carries out quality audits where necessary to ensure that the centre is operating the process properly. Approximately 1,500 centres in Scotland are approved to offer the range of SQA qualifications (SQA, 2010)

## Quality assurance in HEIs

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) enjoy a considerable degree of independence in terms of quality control and academic standards. Each HEI is responsible for the standards of the qualifications it offers and the quality of education it provides to its students. Each has its own internal quality assurance procedures and each institution's governing body is responsible for overseeing quality assurance and enhancement.

## Collective Quality Assurance in HEIs

Although HEIs are responsible for their own quality control, they have collectively developed standard quality assurance mechanisms, in partnership with other HE stakeholders. These mechanisms differ in detail across the four countries of the UK. However, all publicly funded HEIs in the UK use a common set of tools for maintaining their academic quality and standards, known as the UK Academic Infrastructure (Universities UK, 2008) and they are externally checked by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The UK Academic Infrastructure is a set of UK wide agreed guidelines and reference points that cover standards and quality in HE. There are 4 main parts, which are summarised in box 3 below.

## THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION (QAA)

Publicly funded HEIs in Scotland are required to subscribe to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). This is an independent UK-wide body, established in 1997 and supported by subscriptions from HEIs and funds from the UK funding councils. Subscribing institutions pay an annual fee to the QAA based on the number of students at their institution. In addition to its advisory role on degree-awarding powers, the QAA scrutinises and reports on the quality and standards upheld at individual HEIs, on behalf of the collective university sector and UK funding Councils.

The main roles of the QAA are:

- **Conducting external reviews of HEIs**, carrying out external quality assurance checks to ensure they are fulfilling their responsibilities ([Enhancement-led institutional review](#) or 'ELIR' is the method used in Scotland, see below)
- Publishing reports on the confidence that can be placed in an institution's management of standards and quality
- **Providing guidance to HEIs on maintaining academic standards and improving quality through the [Academic Infrastructure](#)** (UK wide – see box 3 below)
- Investigating causes for concern about academic standards and quality
- Advising Governments on applications for **degree awarding powers and university title** (explained above)
- Engaging with European and wider international developments.

### Box 3: The UK Academic Infrastructure

- 1. Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications** – these describe the achievement represented by higher education qualifications. They apply to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards granted by a higher education provider with degree awarding powers. The QAA has developed two frameworks: one for [Scotland](#), which is part of the wider SCQF (QAA, 2001) and a [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#) (QAA, 2008).
- 2. Subject Benchmark Statements** – the QAA has published benchmark statements for a range of academic subjects. These statements set out broad expectations about the nature and standards of degrees in a specific subject area. They describe what can be expected of a graduate in terms of subject coverage and the techniques and skills gained. They are used by those who provide or monitor HE programmes and can also be used by prospective students or employers to inform choices. Some benchmark statements make reference to professional standards required by external professional bodies in the discipline. There are 4 sets of subject benchmark statements. These are:

[Honours degree subject benchmark statements](#)

[Master's level subject benchmark statements](#)

[NHS/Department of Health subject benchmark statements](#)

[Scottish subject benchmark statements](#)

- 3. Programme Specifications** – whilst subject benchmark statements outline the broad expectations of an academic discipline, programme specifications are published by HEIs. These contain detailed information about what can be expected from individual courses or programmes, such as the curriculum structure and assessment process. Programme specifications also explain what knowledge, skills and other attributes a student can expect to have developed if they complete their course successfully.
- 4. The Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education** – This was originally developed by the QAA between 1998 and 2001 to provide guidelines for universities on good practice in managing academic standards and quality. There are ten sections to the [Code of Practice](#), listed below, which cover the key issues an institution should consider when developing its activities under that section. Individual sections have been revised since 2004:
  - Postgraduate research programmes
  - Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)
  - Students with disabilities
  - External examining
  - Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters
  - Assessment of students
  - Programme design, approval, monitoring and review
  - Career education, information and guidance
  - Work-based and placement learning
  - Admissions to higher education



## QAA Review Processes

One of the main roles of the QAA is to review and report on how HEIs implement the UK Academic Infrastructure, to maintain academic standards and quality. There is a variety of [review processes](#) used by the QAA in the UK, depending on the country and type of institution. Reviews are largely carried out by teams made up of senior staff from UK HEIs and professions. Teams in Scotland also include a student member and an international member. Teams in the rest of the UK have included a student member from 2009-10 (QAA). For detail on external review processes in practice, please see [Universities UK's Guide to Quality and Standards in UK Universities](#).

In Scotland, the external review process used is [Enhancement-led Institutional Review](#) or ELIR. This process is one of five main parts to the '**Quality Enhancement Framework for Scotland**', applicable to both HEIs and colleges in Scotland. This framework was fully implemented in Scottish HEIs from 2003-04 (revised in 2008 and extended to colleges) and is explained below.

## QUALITY IN SCOTTISH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND COLLEGES - THE QUALITY ENHANCEMENT FRAMEWORK

### The Role of the Scottish Funding Council

The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 places a statutory duty on the SFC to maintain and enhance the quality of the education that it funds. The SFC's [Corporate plan 2009-12](#) 'Outcome 7: Effective Colleges and Universities' outlines the Council's actions in relation to quality. The SFC's [Quality, Equalities and General Purposes Committee](#) is responsible for overseeing the SFC's statutory function to ensure provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of further and higher education provided by publicly funded institutions.

In 2003, a major review of arrangements for quality assurance in learning and teaching in Scotland was undertaken and the SFC, along with other stakeholders, developed a 'Quality Enhancement Framework' for Scotland. This framework has 5 parts aimed at making continuous improvements to the quality of learning and teaching (SFC, 2008a). It was originally developed for HEIs but later extended to apply to colleges. For detail on the framework, please see box 4 below.

#### *The Joint Quality Review Group (JQRG)*

Following the introduction of the QEF, in 2006 the SFC set up the 'Joint Quality Review Group' (JQRG) to further review policies on quality in further and higher education. The JQRG's [final report](#) in 2007 recommended extending and updating the Council's earlier guidance to HEIs, and for the Council to issue explicit guidance to colleges on quality issues, covering a variety of themes such as institutional governance, external review and student engagement.

The recommendations in the JQRG report have been taken forward by 2 stakeholder working groups for quality, one for HEIs and one for colleges.

**The College Quality Working Group (QWG)** includes members from the SFC, NUS Scotland, HMIE, Scotland's Colleges, Student Participation in Quality Scotland (*sparqs*) and the Quality Community of Practice (QCoP)

**The University QWG** includes stakeholders from the SFC, Universities Scotland, NUS Scotland, the QAA Scotland, HE Academy and *sparqs*.

Both of these working groups provide advice to the SFC and other stakeholders on quality issues for Scottish colleges and universities (SFC, 2009c).

### *Guidance on Quality*

The QEF was revised in 2008 and all universities and colleges in Scotland were asked to provide a 'baseline statement' on their quality assurance policies and procedures for 2008-09 (SFC, 2009a). The SFC then issued new guidance on quality issues to both sectors.

Latest Council Guidance to Colleges on Quality Issues (June 2008):

<http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CircularsSFC3308/sfc3308.pdf>

Latest Council Guidance to Universities on Quality issues (June 2008):

[http://www.sfc.ac.uk/news\\_events\\_circulars/Circulars/2008/SFC3008.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/news_events_circulars/Circulars/2008/SFC3008.aspx)

The SFC also helps fund the UK website [Unistats](#), which provides information for students to help them compare institutions and subjects. For further information on the role of the Scottish Funding Council, please see the SFCs guide ['How does the SFC help enhance the learning experience?'](#) (SFC, 2009b)

#### Box 4: The Quality Enhancement Framework for Scotland

The QAA also has a Scottish office, known as [QAA Scotland](#) and a QAA Scotland Committee. Much of the work of QAA Scotland is part of the 'Quality Enhancement Framework' (QEF), a Scotland specific approach to quality in both the university and college sector. It was originally developed for HEIs in 2003-04 by the Scottish Government, the SFC, Universities Scotland and the National Union of Students Scotland. The framework uses the UK [Academic Infrastructure](#) in a Scottish context. It includes five main elements:

1. A comprehensive programme of internal subject level reviews that are run by institutions themselves. Review at subject level is an institutional responsibility. As recommended by the JQRG and the revised QEF, all HEIs and colleges provided the SFC with a 'baseline statement' in the academic year 2008-09, which describes how their governing bodies ensure accountability for quality within their institution. The QAA's analysis of HEI baseline reports can be accessed [here](#) (SFC, 2009). HMIE's analysis of college baseline reports can be accessed [here](#) (HMIE, 2010). From this baseline year, institutions report annually to the SFC on their internal review activities (SFC, 2008a). Their reports are considered by the SFCs [Quality, Equalities and General Purposes Committee](#).
2. Periodic external review, known as 'enhancement-led institutional review' or 'ELIR'. The main focus of the ELIR is to examine the strategies taken by each institution to continually improve the learning experience of its students, the ability of the institution to manage the standards of its academic awards and the quality of learning it provides. As with other review methods, the ELIR process monitors how Scottish HEIs are putting the [UK Academic Infrastructure](#) guidance and reference points into practice, within a Scottish context. All Scottish HEIs are reviewed over a maximum of a 6 year cycle, with the last cycle taking place between 2004 and 2007. ELIR reports for each Scottish HEI from the latest review cycle can be accessed [here](#). Each report makes a 'confidence judgement' about the effectiveness of an HEI to maintain standards and enhance quality. The SFC has a service level agreement with QAA Scotland to carry out ELIRs in Scottish HEIs. The review teams are appointed by QAA Scotland. Under the revised 2008 QEF, a new cycle of ELIRs started in the academic year 2008-09 (SFC, 2008a). In Scotland's colleges, external reviews of quality are carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), explained later in this briefing.
3. Improved forms of public information about quality
4. An SFC funded national development service for student representatives in Scottish HEIs and colleges, called [sparqs](#) (student participation in quality Scotland), aimed at improving the effectiveness of student engagement in quality processes. *Sparqs* was formed in 2003 and is the joint responsibility of the [NUS Scotland](#), [Scotland's Colleges](#), [Universities Scotland](#), [QAA Scotland](#), [The Higher Education Academy](#) and [Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education](#) (HMIE). *Sparqs* activities include: training sessions for student representatives and workshops for staff on student involvement, briefing events on effective representative systems, sharing best practise on student engagement; and bespoke consultancy support for individual institutions and student associations.

5. A national programme of [Enhancement Themes](#), aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in higher education. The work of Enhancement Themes is planned and directed by the sector-led Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee ([SHEEC](#)), with support from the QAA.

## Quality Assurance in Scotland's Colleges - HMIE External Reviews

As with the QAA for HEIs, the SFC has a service level agreement with HMIE to carry out external reviews of quality arrangements of Scotland's colleges, within 4-year cycles. Review teams are made up of HM Inspectors, Associate Assessors from the sector, and from 2008 also include a student representative. Following revision of the Quality Enhancement Framework in 2008, a new set of [external quality review arrangements](#) for colleges has been introduced by the SFC and HMIE, for the period 2008-12 (HMIE, 2008). HMIE external review reports on individual colleges can be accessed [here](#). Further detail on the new review arrangements can be accessed from [HMIE](#).

In addition to the cyclical HMIE external reviews, the SFC commission HMIE to produce 'aspect' reports, which identify best practise and areas for development around certain themes relevant to the college sector (SFC, 'Quality in Scotland's Colleges').

## Current Issues

### *Independent Evaluation of the QEF*

The SFCs quality enhancement framework and its implementation in both Scotland's college and university sector are currently being independently evaluated over four years. There is also a Joint Quality Evaluation Steering Group overseeing the evaluation of the QEF. The first annual evaluation reports were published in October 2009 and executive summaries of these reports are available from the links below:

[Evaluation of the SFC quality enhancement strategy in the university sector- executive summary](#) (Centre for the Study of Education and Training, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, 2009)

[Evaluation of the SFC strategy for quality enhancement in the college sector- executive summary](#) (Learning and Skills Network, 2009)

### *SFC Review of the Quality Enhancement framework*

The current quality enhancement cycle for college and HIE sectors will last until the end of the academic year (AY) 2011-12. The SFC proposes to carry out a review of quality arrangements in AY 2010-11, with a view to having the revised model ready to start in August 2012. The proposed review will look at both the HE and FE sectors.

### *Evaluation of the UK Academic Infrastructure*

The QAA, along with key higher education organisations, is currently evaluating the UK Academic Infrastructure to determine if it is still fit for purpose. It is intended that the findings will be published in summer 2010, which will include recommendations for its future development.

For further information on the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure, please see the [QAA project plan](#) (QAA, 2009).

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