

Briefing: What is higher education?

Higher education in Scotland – an overview

Higher education is a term used to describe post-school education of a certain intellectual standard that contains elements of theoretical, abstract and conceptual knowledge and is taught in an environment which also includes advanced research activity. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) measures all qualifications according to 12 levels of complexity from one as the least complex up to 12 as the most complex. Higher education is ranked at level seven to 12. Higher education is delivered by universities, higher education institutions and other specialist institutions that have the capacity to award academic degrees. Some low-level higher education is delivered by further education colleges.

The sector in Scotland

As of August 2007 there are 20 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland. The sector is diverse, delivering 4,400 courses via several distinctive institutions including fourteen campus based universities, one distance-learning university, a unique educational partnership institution based in the Highlands and Islands, two art schools, a conservatoire and an agricultural college. All higher education institutions are private bodies and all have charitable status. Each institution is led by a Principal or Director and governed by a university Court or Board of Governors which has a majority of lay members.

Scotland's universities developed in three broad stages, each with a different legal basis. The ancient universities (St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh) date from the 15th and 16th centuries. Four other institutions (Dundee, Strathclyde, Heriot-Watt and Stirling) achieved university title in the 1960s. The newest group (Glasgow Caledonian, Napier, the West of Scotland [formerly Paisley], Robert Gordon and Abertay) became universities in the early 1990s. Most recently Queen Margaret University Edinburgh gained its university title in July 2007.

Higher education has traditionally been known and funded for two main 'missions'; learning and teaching and research.

Learning and Teaching

Learning and teaching will always be at the core of higher education. The quality of education in Scottish universities is internationally recognised as all institutions undergo a rigorous process of quality and standards assurance. Scottish institutions operate a unique system of enhancement-led institutional review which places a greater emphasis on the learning experience of students and creates a direct role for students in internal and external quality review process. The enhancement-led approach also means there is a culture of continuous enhancement of quality within Scottish higher education. The Scottish sector's completion rate is also good with 84 per cent of students completing their courses. This equals the UK's rate and better than other comparable higher education sectors around the world.

Research

The pursuit of new knowledge is another Scottish success. Research quality in Scotland is strong with 85.3 per cent of staff in Scottish institutions that participated in the last research assessment exercise, which is a measure of the excellence of research in the UK, rated as being of international quality. Scotland punches above its weight in regard to competitive sources of research funding winning more than 12.5 per cent share of the UK sector's funding from UK Research Councils and a 13 per cent share of the UK sector's funding from industry, commerce and public corporations.

More recently the principles of widening access and knowledge translation have become central to higher education institutions in Scotland.

Knowledge translation

This is the process of getting the knowledge, ideas and discoveries created in higher education out of the universities and into the places where they can have the most effect. This might mean spin-out companies based on new discoveries, consultancy work with both multi-national companies and small to medium sized enterprises, intellectual property and patenting. But it equally means getting high-skill graduates into the workplace, into public services and policy environments where they can improve Scotland's competitiveness. A recent government survey has shown that Scotland is more successful at knowledge transfer than the other UK countries and is more efficient at knowledge transfer than the top US universities.

Widening access

Scotland's higher education institutions are committed to ensuring that everyone has an equal chance of getting a degree based on ability rather than socio-economic factors. Universities run a wide range of programmes to widen access to under-represented or non-traditional groups. While much still needs to be done, Scotland currently has a better record in attracting students from low participation areas than the other parts of the UK. Currently 18.6 per cent of students studying in higher education in Scotland come from neighbourhoods with low participation rates compared to a UK average of only 14 per cent. Participation rates of mature and disabled students have also increased in Scottish institutions in recent years.

The size and shape of the sector in Scotland

Students

In 2005-06 there were a total of 215,880 students studying in the higher education sector in Scotland. Around 69 per cent of all students study full-time with 31 per cent choosing to study part-time. 75 per cent of students study at the undergraduate level and the remaining 25 per cent at postgraduate level. Scotland's higher education providers also deliver vocational education and training courses to

over 30,000 people. Scotland's higher education sector is internationally competitive in both teaching and research and therefore it is not surprising that the sector holds a great appeal for international students. About 15 per cent of students in Scottish institutions come from outside the UK.

Staff

The sector directly employed 37,865 people in 2005/06 of which 72 per cent are employed full time. More than 40 per cent of staff are academic professionals. Higher education's greatest asset is its staff and therefore its not surprising that its also the single largest expenditure for higher education institutions costing £1.2 billion in 2005/06.

Income and expenditure

The sector's total income exceeded £2.1 billion in 2005/06 of which approximately 51 per cent comes from core payments from the public sector. The remaining 49 per cent is raised on the strength of the sector's performance and reputation both nationally and internationally in the form of international tuition fees, research contracts, consultancy and other services. Staff represent 60 per cent of total expenditure.

The impact of higher education in Scotland

Higher education benefits everyone, not just those who go to university. Higher education is an essential motor of the Scottish economy, providing high-skill graduates, offering training and research and development for industry and inventing new products and processes which can create new markets for Scottish industry. Higher education is also essential to Scotland's cultural landscape as a significant provider and investor in the creative arts in its own right, by offering a seedbed and a shop window for many of those who will become the creative voices of Scotland's future, providing a space for people to think about and discuss Scottish culture, promoting artistic achievements around the world and safeguarding the heritage of Scotland for future generations.

Higher education is central to making Scotland a better place; it helps to inform public policy, works to break down inequalities by widening access to minority groups, produces generation after generation of more informed Scots and creates an essential forum for free debate in which to discuss the social, political, environmental and economic health of Scotland. Higher education is one of Scotland's success stories. In 2005 higher education institutions generated at least £381 million, or nine per cent of Scotland's service sector export earnings which makes it larger than Scotland's land, water and air transport industries.

More than that Scotland is recognised around the world as one of the most respected seats of learning, with a fine tradition and an impressive current performance. Higher education puts Scotland on the map.