

Introduction

Learning and teaching has always been the core of university activity. Scotland's 20 higher education institutions educate more than 215,000 students on almost 4,400 courses in more than 150 different subject groupings.

Learning and Teaching

Educational programmes in higher education have a strong theoretical underpinning and many also have a strong vocational element. Learning is at a level which would qualify someone to work in a professional field and takes place in an environment which also includes advanced research or scholarship activity. Approaches to learning in higher education are increasingly diverse. Traditional lectures, tutorials and seminars still take place but approaches such as problem-based, computer-assisted, workplace and e-learning environments are also used. The learning environments in which teaching takes place are increasingly sophisticated with state-of-the-art laboratories, design studios and IT facilities essential to the work-readiness of students upon graduation. The amount of teaching contact time varies from course to course but an important element of higher education is that students develop the skills necessary for self-directed learning, playing an active part in managing their own learning whatever the discipline, with support and guidance from academic staff.

There is no national curriculum in higher education. Each degree awarding institution decides on the purpose, content and means of assessment of its programmes of learning and qualifications. This means that even though a course or qualification may have the same title in two universities, the content may be quite different. This diversity is one of the great strengths of higher education. However, each university, in developing and reviewing its qualifications, works within the parameters of the 'Academic Infrastructure' which is maintained by the Quality Assurance Agency on behalf of the sector. The Academic Infrastructure includes the Framework for Qualifications of Scottish Higher Education Institutions, as well as UK-wide subject benchmark statements (which set out expectations about standards of degrees, relevant abilities, skills, understanding or competences of graduates in each subject area), Code of Practice, and Programme Specifications.

The quality of teaching and qualifications in higher education

The quality of teaching in Scottish higher education institutions is internationally recognised as world class. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the non-departmental government body that funds higher education has a statutory duty to assure quality and standards and it contracts the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to undertake this. Previous approaches to quality assurance involved external compliance-

focussed inspections at subject level. This demonstrated that eighty-four per cent of all teaching in Scotland's universities was either highly satisfactory or excellent. In recognition of this achievement and the strong quality culture which Scottish universities have developed the SFC invited Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland and NUS Scotland to develop a new approach to quality in higher education that focuses on quality enhancement. The Quality Enhancement Framework which was introduced in 2003-04 recognises that the primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with universities, including their students. The Framework has five main elements:

- A comprehensive programme of subject reviews within each higher education institution;
- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (this is a peer-led review, which includes a student reviewer and an international reviewer);
- Improved public information about quality, addressing the needs of a range of stakeholders;
- Student engagement in the management of quality at all levels within institutions. A national development service called sparqs (Student Participation in Quality Scotland) helps to support and assist students and student associations to engage in the quality process.
- A national programme of enhancement themes, aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in HE, drawing on international good practice.

Qualifications

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

The SCQF was developed to promote an understanding of how different qualifications relate to one another to help people progress through learning opportunities. All the main qualifications available in Scotland including those from schools, further education colleges, universities and other providers are placed on a 12-level scale of complexity, ranging from level one to level 12. Higher education qualifications are at levels seven to 12. Qualifications also have a 'credit rating' expressed in credit points which can help learners gain credit towards future studies. Higher education in Scotland increasingly takes place in a broader European context and the SCQF works alongside the European Credit Transfer and accumulation Scheme (ECTS). The ECTS is a means of comparing the study attainment of higher education students across the European Union and other collaborating European countries.

Students at university work towards a number of different qualifications from a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) at the sub-degree level up to doctoral qualifications at the postgraduate level/third cycle. The Qualifications of Scottish higher education institutions have been certified as compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The most popular qualification in Scotland is the Honours degree which takes four years to complete on a full-time basis. Students in Scotland can also elect to graduate with a (three year) Ordinary degree. Both are EHEA 1st

cycle degrees. Scottish higher education institutions offer Masters degrees (2nd cycle) and doctoral degrees (3rd Cycle). The higher education sector also provides Diplomas and Certificates of Higher Education, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas ('short cycle' qualifications), as well as other short vocational courses and a significant amount of continuing professional development, adult and evening classes.

The European Higher Education Area

In 1999 29 European countries signed up to the Bologna Declaration; an intergovernmental European reform process aimed at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The EHEA is envisaged as an open space that allows students, graduates, and HE staff to benefit from easier mobility and equitable access to high quality higher education. The key features of the EHEA will be mutual recognition of degrees, transparency (readable and broadly comparable degrees organised in a three-cycle structure) and European cooperation on quality assurance. It is thought that this process will make the European Higher Education Area more attractive to higher education staff and students across the world. Since 1999 the Bologna Process has developed an over-arching qualifications framework for the EHEA and standards and guidelines for quality assurance and a European register of Quality Assurance Agencies. There are now 46 countries involved in the Bologna process. Scotland is, along with Ireland, one of only two countries whose framework for HE qualifications has been certified as compatible with the EHEA qualifications framework. It is expected that arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement in Scottish HE will also be verified as consistent with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance during 2008 as part of a UK-wide exercise.