

# QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

In the UK, quality assurance in higher education takes place at various levels. Only state recognized universities are allowed to award academic degrees such as bachelor's, master's or Ph.D. degrees.

Before they enter the academic education market, universities are subjected to an initial state inspection. This ensures that they meet minimum quality standards.

## *Degree-Awarding Powers*

In Great Britain, degree-awarding power means the right to award academic degrees. Universities that have this power are designated as Degree-Awarding Bodies or Recognised Bodies.

State-funded universities have the right to award academic degrees for an unlimited period of time. Private institutions, on the other hand, must apply for renewal every six years.

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## *QAA and UK Quality Code*

State-recognized universities are autonomous and therefore responsible for the design of their programs and the processes of their quality assurance. There is no national accreditation or approval of study programs in the UK. Nevertheless, there are uniform, national minimum standards that all state recognized universities must meet with regard to their study programs.

The national agency for quality assurance, the QAA (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education), defines these standards in the so-called UK Quality Code for Higher Education. The QAA primarily has an advisory and supportive function for the universities. Even though the Quality Code is not enshrined in law, its requirements are binding.

# The *UK Quality Code*

The Quality Code is continuously adapted to current developments. It basically consists of three parts:

- Part A: Establishing and maintaining academic standards (Academic Standards)
- Part B: Ensuring and improving academic quality (Academic Quality)
- Part C: Provision of information about higher education (Information about Higher Education Provision)

## Part A

Part A sets minimum standards and provides a common starting and reference point for higher education institutions.

This is primarily concerned with the minimum level of learning that a student must achieve in order to complete a course or obtain a degree. This minimum level is the same throughout the UK for degrees at the same qualification level (Bachelor's, Master's, Ph.D.).

Since the Quality Code only specifies the lower limit, some individual universities also set higher minimum standards. The limits for achieving special awards such as a first-class honours degree (comparable to a very good German Bachelor's or Master's degree) can also vary.

## Part B

Part B relates to the support HEIs should provide to their students in achieving the learning goal. This involves learning processes, the quality of teaching and the mode of assessment. It also includes all the resources and processes a HEI uses to support its students in reaching their potential.

## Part C

Part C provides guidelines for the provision of student information. The information should be fit for purpose, reliable and easily accessible to students.

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# Internal and external quality assurance at the universities

Each UK HEI also has internal quality assurance mechanisms. As HEIs act autonomously, these mechanisms may vary from HEI to HEI.

However, all HEIs carry out regular internal quality assurance reviews of the programmes they offer:

- Annual Monitoring
- Periodic Reviews (major review every five years)

The reference point here is always the UK Quality Code.

The QAA also carries out external audits at the universities. There are regular inspections by QAA auditors, as a result of which the QAA issues a report. In this report, the auditors comment on and assess the quality standards of the respective institution. The reports are publicly accessible so that interested parties can inform themselves about the results at any time. The QAA examinations have parallels to the audit procedure that is common in New Zealand, for example.

In some disciplines, it is common for another body to participate in quality assurance. For example, in medical subjects and in the field of engineering, recognition by the relevant professional association is required.

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# FHEQ und FQHEIS

There are also two reference frameworks for tertiary qualifications in the UK:

- The FHEQ (Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland).
- The FQHEIS (Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland).

Both the FHEQ and the FQHEIS contain different levels (Levels) and assign an educational level with certain competences to each academic degree. The QAA administers both frameworks and is also responsible for quality assurance.

The frameworks are aids for higher education institutions and external examiners. They provide a reference for setting academic standards and assessing student success. Higher education institutions rank their programmes at the appropriate level. They ensure that the intended minimum learning outcome of the programme matches the intended minimum learning outcome of the respective level. External examiners then regularly check this correspondence.