

Benchmarking the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma in the UK Education System

SUMMARY REPORT



The SQA Advanced Certificate is considered comparable to the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and may provide direct entry or credit exemptions to Year 1 of a Bachelor degree course, at institutional discretion.

The SQA Advanced Diploma is considered comparable to the Higher National Diploma (HND) and may provide direct entry to the second or third year of study of a relevant Bachelor degree programme, at institutional discretion.

1. Overview of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diplomas

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Advanced Certificate and Advanced Diploma¹ are higher education qualifications developed in partnership with colleges, universities and industry. The SQA Advanced qualifications are offered internationally in a range of subjects including but not limited to: accounting, architectural technology, art and design, business, chemical engineering, computing (with various specialisations), construction management, electronics, hospitality, hospitality management, mechanical engineering, quantity surveying, retail and retail management and travel and tourism.

This report is designed to provide guidance on the comparable academic standing of the two awards in the context of the UK education system.

Entry and duration

The SQA Advanced Certificate is a one-year programme, allocated 96 SCQF Points (960 notional learning hours). Entry requirements are set at the discretion of individual centres but may include National/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQ 2 or 3), other qualifications at Level 5 or 6 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), comparable work experience, or a centre-devised test. Programmes are assessed in English and as such entrants who are non-native speakers will typically also need an ESOL certificate at SCQF level 5 or an IELTS band 5.5 for admission.

¹ Previously known as the SQA Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND).
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Entry into an SQA Advanced Diploma course, which typically consists of two years of study², is the same as the entry requirements specified above. The first year comprises 1200 notional learning hours, with the total Diploma worth 240 SCQF Credit Points (2400 notional learning hours). Those already holding the SQA Advanced Certificate may enter the second year of the SQA Advanced Diploma programme.

Structure and content

The SQA Advanced qualifications have a unit-based structure³. Each subject has mandatory units, taken by all students, and a range of optional units allowing students to specialise in a particular area. For example, those undertaking the SQA Advanced Certificate in Hospitality would be expected to develop a general understanding of the hospitality industry and then specialise in hospitality management, professional cookery or events. Similarly those taking an SQA Advanced Certificate or Diploma in Business would have the opportunity to specialise in aspects of accounting and finance, business culture, communication – research skills, customer service, e-commerce, economics, enterprise and employability, financial services, human resource management, information technology, international business, legal, management skills, marketing/sales, mathematics and statistics, office skills, personal and social development, public administration, supply chain management or sustainability.

Aims and learning outcomes

Aims are generally stated for each subject group, and can be broadly summarised as follows:

- To ensure students will be prepared for employment
- To develop study and research skills
- To develop transferable skills including Core Skills for employment: communication, numeracy, information and communication technology, problem solving and working with others.

Specific aims are also set for each award, detailing the subject-specific knowledge and skills that should be developed.

The SQA Advanced Certificate is placed at Level 7 of the SCQF, and the SQA Advanced Diploma at Level 8, where students at these levels should be able to demonstrate knowledge and skills such as the following:

	Indicators of SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Certificate)	Indicators of SCQF Level 8 (Advanced Diploma)
Knowledge and understanding	Demonstrate and/or work with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overall appreciation of the body of knowledge that constitutes a subject/discipline/sector. • Knowledge that is embedded in the main theories, concepts and principles of the subject / discipline / sector. • An awareness of the dynamic nature of knowledge and understanding. • An understanding of the difference between explanations based on evidence and/or research and other sources, and of the importance of this difference. 	Demonstrate and/or work with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A knowledge of the scope, defining features, and main areas of the subject / discipline / sector. • Specialist knowledge in some areas. • A discerning understanding of a defined range of core theories, concepts, principles and terminology. • Awareness and understanding of some major current issues and specialisms. • Awareness and understanding of research and equivalent scholarly/academic processes.
Practice: Applied knowledge, skills and understanding	Apply knowledge, skills and understanding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In practical contexts. • In using some of the basic and routine professional skills, techniques, practices and/or materials associated with the subject/discipline/sector. • To practise these in both routine and non-routine contexts. 	Apply knowledge, skills and understanding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In using a range of professional skills, techniques, practices and/or materials associated with the subject/discipline/sector, a few of which are advanced and/or complex. • In carrying out routine lines of enquiry, development or investigation into professional level problems and issues. • To adapt routine practices within accepted standards.

² Scottish Qualifications Authority, "Guide to SQA Advanced Qualifications," 3.

³ There is a fixed and a non-fixed framework for some of the SQA Advanced qualifications. Both frameworks have the same credit requirements; however the construction of the latter is more flexible and individual centres can choose to create their own content and structure, using guidelines provided by SQA.

	Indicators of SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Certificate)	Indicators of SCQF Level 8 (Advanced Diploma)
Generic cognitive skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present and evaluate arguments, information and ideas that are routine to a subject/discipline/sector. Use a range of approaches to address defined and/or routine problems and issues within familiar contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake critical analysis, evaluation and/or synthesis of ideas, concepts, information and issues that are within the common understandings in a subject/discipline/sector. Use a range of approaches to formulate and critically evaluate evidence-based solutions/responses to defined and/or routine problems and issues.
Communication, ICT and numeracy skills	<p>Use a wide range of routine skills and some advanced skills associated with a subject/discipline/sector, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convey complex ideas in well-structured and coherent form. Use a range of forms of communication effectively in both familiar and unfamiliar contexts. Select and use standard ICT applications to process and obtain a variety of information and data. Use a range of numerical and graphical skills in combination. Use numerical and graphical data to measure progress and achieve goals/targets. 	<p>Use a wide range of routine skills and some advanced and specialised skills associated with a subject/discipline/sector, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convey complex information to a range of audiences and for a range of purposes. Use a range of standard ICT applications to process and obtain data. Use and evaluate numerical and graphical data to measure progress and achieve goals/targets.
Autonomy, accountability and working with others	<p>Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities at a professional level in practice or in a subject/discipline/sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept supervision in less familiar areas of work. Exercise some managerial or supervisory responsibility for the work of others within a defined and supervised structure. Manage limited resources within defined areas of work. Take the lead in implementing agreed plans in familiar or defined contexts. Take account of own and others' roles and responsibilities when carrying out and evaluating tasks. Work, under guidance, with others to acquire an understanding of current professional practice. 	<p>Exercise autonomy and initiative in some activities at a professional level in practice or in a subject/discipline/sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exercise managerial responsibility for the work of others within a defined structure. Manage resources within defined areas of work. Take the lead on planning in familiar or defined contexts. Practise in ways that show awareness of own and others' roles, responsibilities and contributions when carrying out and evaluating tasks. Work, under guidance, with others to acquire an understanding of current professional practice. Manage, under guidance, ethical and professional issues in accordance with current professional and/or ethical codes or practices

Assessment and grading

The methods of assessment vary by subject and by centre; however these may include open-book assessments such as case studies, practical exercises and observations, written projects, portfolios, and oral presentations. SQA provides clear guidance to centres on designing valid and reliable assessments. For example, the Business Graded Unit 1, taken in both the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma, is assessed by a three hour closed-book examination consisting of two papers based on a previously seen case study. The Business Graded Unit 2, done towards the end of the SQA Advanced Diploma course is a project where candidates are given a real or simulated business problem to evaluate.

Students receive a final certificate and accompanying transcript detailing the units undertaken. Generally, units are graded on a pass or fail basis, with the exception of graded units which are marked out of 100 and are given a letter grade; C (50%) is the minimum pass grade.⁴

Certification and progression

On successful completion, candidates are awarded an SQA Advanced Certificate or an Advanced Diploma in their field of study. SQA Advanced Certificate holders may advance to further study, including to the second year of an SQA Advanced Diploma. SQA has a Diploma to Degree programme⁵ to support progression for holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma to the second or third year of study at an SQA Progression Partner university.

⁴ Scottish Qualifications Authority, "SQA Advanced Certificate in Business (GM8A 47) SQA Advanced Diploma in Business (GM8Y 48)," 30.

⁵ <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/79553.html>
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2. Comparative analysis with the UK education system

Due to the devolved responsibility for education in the UK, the structure of compulsory and higher education varies, however, it is usually compulsory for students in each administration to be in full-time secondary school education until the age of 16 (or 17 for Northern Ireland, depending on birthdates), at which point they take the appropriate school-leaving certificate. In England, students must also remain in some form of full-time education and training until they turn 18.

Each administration in the UK has its own national qualifications frameworks for general and vocational qualifications and higher education as shown below:

	Responsibility for education	Regulation of qualifications	General / vocational qualifications framework	Higher education framework
England	Department for Education	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) (general and vocational education) QAA (higher education)	The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) comprises nine levels, including an Entry Level and Level 1 (lowest) to Level 8 (highest).	The Framework for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). The FHEQ has five levels from Level 4 (lowest) to Level 8 (highest).
Northern Ireland	Department for Education for Northern Ireland	Ofqual QAA (higher education) Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)		
Wales	Department for Education and Skills	QAA (higher education) Qualifications Wales	The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) comprises nine levels, including an Entry Level and Level 1 (lowest) to Level 8 (highest).	
Scotland	Scottish Parliament Learning Directorate	Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)	The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The SCQF consists of 12 levels: Level 1 (lowest) to Level 12 (highest)	The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS/SCQF). The FQHEIS/SCQF has six levels from Level 7 (lowest) to Level 12 (highest).

Each framework comprises a range of levels, accompanied by level descriptors setting out the indicative knowledge and skills typically associated with The *Qualifications can Cross Boundaries*⁶ document, produced by the regulators in each country, is designed to facilitate understanding of the qualifications frameworks in the UK and Ireland and to enable broad comparisons to be drawn between the levels in each. The table below contains some information from the *Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries* document, for ease of reference:

⁶ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf>
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Framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland		Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for England and Northern Ireland		Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)		Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)	
Level	Qualifications include:	Level	Qualifications include:	Level	Qualifications include:	Level	Qualifications include:
8	Doctoral Degrees	8	Technical / Vocational Qualifications Level 8	8	Doctoral Degrees	12	Doctoral Degrees
7	Master's degrees Postgraduate Diplomas Postgraduate Certificates	7	Technical / Vocational Qualifications Level 7	7	Master's degrees	11	Master's degree Postgraduate Diplomas Postgraduate Certificates
6	Bachelor (Honours) degrees Bachelor degrees	6	Technical / Vocational Qualifications Level 6	6	Honours degrees	10	Bachelor's degrees with Honours
						9	Bachelor's Ordinary degrees
5	Foundation degrees Diplomas of Higher Education Higher National Diplomas	5	Technical / Vocational Qualifications Level 5 Higher National Diplomas	5	Foundation degrees Higher National Diplomas	8	Higher National Diplomas Diplomas of Higher Education Advanced Diploma
						7	Higher National Certificates Certificates of Higher Education Advanced Certificate
4	Higher National Certificates Certificates of Higher Education	3	Technical / Vocational Qualifications Level 3 GCE AS and A Levels	3	AS and A Level Welsh Baccaulaureate Advanced	6	Higher
		2	Technical / Vocational Qualifications Level 2 GCSEs at grade A*-C (Grades 4-9 in England)	2	GCSEs at grades A*-C Welsh Baccaulaureate National	5	National 5
		1	Technical / Vocational Qualifications Level 2 GCSEs at grade D-G (Grades 3-1 in England)	1	GCSEs at grade D-G Welsh Baccaulaureate Foundation	4	National 4
		Entry Level	Entry Level Certificates	Entry Level	Entry Level Qualifications	3	National 3
						2	National 2
						1	National 1

As this shows, when considering the broad comparability of SCQF Level 7 qualifications, Level 4 qualifications in the RQF / FHEQ / CQFW provides the best fit for comparability; whilst for SCQF Level 8, Level 5 of the RQF / FHEQ / CQFW is a better fit. As the table shows however, the SCQF has more levels than the frameworks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and it's important as such to also look at the qualifications within them to determine comparability.

Noting that the SQA Advanced qualifications are designed to prepare students both for further study and employment, the most relevant awards in England, Wales and Northern Ireland would be the Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). The HNCs and HNDs are offered in further and higher education institutions across the UK; and are available in a range of subjects. The list is extensive and includes travel and tourism, business management, hospitality, health and social care, professional development in theatre dance and management leadership.

The entry requirements for HNCs / Level 4 Diplomas and HNDs / Level 5 Diplomas vary by programme and are at the discretion of individual centres. Typically these may include a qualification at Level 3⁷ (SCQF Level 6), experience and English language competency⁸ and as such, the HNC and HND entry requirements are similar to those of the SQA Advanced qualifications (SCQF Level 5/6).

The Level 4 HNCs are generally made up of 1200 hours each⁹, and typically take one year to complete on a full-time basis. The Level 5 HNDs are designed to build on the qualifications at a previous level, making the total duration 2400 hours (including the first year which is at Level 4)¹⁰ – this is the same as the duration set out for the SQA Advanced Diploma. There are core / mandatory units which give candidates the

⁷ OTHM, "OTHM Level 5 Diploma in Business Management.," 2017, https://www.othm.org.uk/doc/specification/OTHM_L5_DipBM_spec17_08.pdf; Pearson, "Pearson Higher Nationals in Business. Specification. First Teaching from September 2016. First Certification from 2017. Issue 5.," 2018, <https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/BTEC-Higher-Nationals/Business/2016/Specification/btec-higher-nationals-business-specification.pdf>; ABE, "ABE Level 4 Diplomas - Qualification Specification," March 2018, <https://www.abeuk.com/courses-qualifications/qualification/abe-level-4-diploma-business-management>.

⁸ Typically, where stipulated, the English Language requirement for non-native speakers is an IELTS score of 5.5 or equivalent

⁹ Total Qualification Time which encompasses 480 guided learning hours.

¹⁰ ABE, "ABE Level 4 Diplomas - Qualification Specification," 5; Pearson, "Pearson Higher Nationals in Business. Specification. First Teaching from September 2016. First Certification from 2017. Issue 5.," 20.

foundation they need for their chosen subject/course; students can then choose from a selection of electives.

Various delivery modes are used for the FHEQ Level 4 and 5 qualifications including classroom-based learning, e-learning, work-based learning as well as webinars; or a combination. Assessment types include, but are by no means limited to, portfolios, coursework, e-assessment, practical demonstration/assignments, observed work experience and oral or written examination; similar to those employed by the SQA Advanced qualifications.

In terms of grading, the HNC and HND typically use a fail/pass/merit/distinction grading scale. Students receive a mark for individual units and some units are graded on an outcome level where candidate have to pass all the associated outcomes for the unit; for other providers candidates must attain a minimum of a certain percentage (40-54%) in order to pass the whole unit. In order to graduate students must pass all core units and their elective units.

The HNCs and HNDs are designed to prepare students for employment or for further study and as such should enable progression within their respective frameworks. The specific articulation or credit exemptions will largely be determined by the subject, and the relevance of it to the student's chosen degree¹¹. The HNC and SQA Advanced Certificate may provide direct entry to the first year of study, or advanced standing where in a relevant field of study, allowing entry to Year 2 in some institutions and programmes. The HND and SQA Advanced Diploma can similarly be considered broadly comparable in terms of overall entry requirements and learning outcomes to the first two years of undergraduate study and be considered for advanced standing (Year 2, up to a maximum of Year 3 entry) at institutional discretion and when studied in a relevant field.

3. Key findings

The SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma are found to be well-designed and internationally-relevant programmes, noting in particular that they:

- Are developed with colleges, universities and employers – the qualification design process includes consultation with key external stakeholders designed and reference to National Occupational Standards, to help ensure the relevance of the SQA qualifications to learners and to labour market needs
- Have established progression routes in key destination countries such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA, enabling students to top-up, with further study, to a Bachelor degree in a number of universities
- Career-focussed, practical learning: integrating core skills relevant to employment and with a structure that provides a well-rounded overview of the subject area as well as a specialisation through its combination of optional and mandatory units.

Overall, the SQA Advanced Certificate is considered comparable to the HNC and as such, may provide direct entry to the first year of study, or credit exemptions where in a relevant field of study. The SQA Advanced Diploma is considered broadly comparable to HND standard in terms of overall entry requirements, structure, duration, modes of learning and assessment, and learning outcomes. As such, it

¹¹ The University of Bristol may allow holders of a BTEC or SQA HNC or HND (same level as Advanced Certificate and Diploma respectively) to enter Year 1, or for certain courses, Year 2 (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/entry-requirements-qualifications/uk-qualifications/#hnc>). The Open University also accepts HNCs and HNDs for credit transfer. According to the OU *Previous Study Finder* (<http://www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/my-previous-study/scottish-college-study>), credit will be awarded on the basis of 1 OU credit to 1 SCQF credit, awarded in multiples of 30. The exact credit transfer will be based both on the chosen subject of study at HNC/D level and the chosen degree. Ulster University currently allows HNC holders to enter Year 1, whilst holders of an HND may be considered for Year 2 entry where the individual units sufficiently compare to the Year 1 programme of study. The SQA has defined articulation arrangements with a number of universities in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland, similarly allowing admission to the second or third year of a relevant Bachelor degree programme.
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may be considered for advanced standing (Year 2, up to a maximum of Year 3 entry) at institutional discretion and when studied in a relevant field.

4. Methodology

Based on UK NARIC's well-established methodology for credential evaluation, this independent benchmarking study comprised a review of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma as well as national awards in the UK education system. This took into consideration the following core criteria:

- Entry requirements
- Duration
- Structure and content
- Modes of learning and assessment
- Learning outcomes
- Associated outcomes.

Relevant information on the UK education system and comparable qualifications was obtained from UK NARIC's *International Comparisons* database and official websites of the English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish education authorities and institutions.