

Higher education courses and qualifications

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UK universities and colleges offer thousands of excellent courses, leading to qualifications that are respected by employers and academics worldwide. When you think of UK higher education qualifications, you might think of bachelor's and master's degrees, MBAs and PhDs. There are, however, many other types.

At **undergraduate level** the main qualifications offered are:

- **Bachelor's or undergraduate degree:** Academic study designed to help you gain a thorough understanding of a subject. Full-time, this normally takes three years to complete (four in some cases). There are different titles of degree, such as: Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Science (BSc), Bachelor of Education (BEd) and Bachelor of Engineering (BEng).

Degrees are classified as either Ordinary or Honours – this can vary between universities and colleges. Generally an 'ordinary' or 'unclassified' degree may be awarded if a student has completed a full degree course but hasn't obtained the total required passes sufficient to merit a third-class honours degree. In Scotland, an 'ordinary' degree is usually a three-year full-time course, whereas an 'honours' degree is usually a four-year full-time course.

- **Foundation degree:** The equivalent of the first two years of an honours degree, this may be studied full- or part-time, and consists of academic study integrated with relevant work-based learning undertaken with an employer. It may be studied as a standalone qualification or upon completion, you may progress to the final year of an honours degree.
- **Diploma of Higher Education:** Two year, full-time DipHE courses are normally equivalent to the first two years of a degree and can often be used for entry to the third year of a related degree course. They can be academic, but are mainly linked to a particular job or profession such as nursing and social work.
- **Certificate of Higher Education:** Focuses on either a particular job or profession, or academic study. Equivalent to the first year of a full honours degree, they are the most basic level of qualification that can be gained in higher education and show that you

are capable of studying successfully at university level. You can use a CertHE to gain confidence to study successfully at university level, change careers or progress your current career, or to achieve a foundation degree, DipHE or full honours degree through additional study.

- **Higher National Diploma (HND):** A two-year course which, if completed with high grades, can lead to the third year of a degree.

To read more about Foundation programmes, HNDs, DipHE and CertHE qualifications, see [Shorter undergraduate courses](#).

At **postgraduate level**, the main qualifications offered are:

- Master's degree. A master's qualification allows you to further your knowledge in a particular subject, or to go in a completely different direction, using the skills you've gained from your undergraduate studies. A master's degree is an academic qualification awarded to individuals who successfully demonstrate a higher level of expertise in a particular field of study. You can study one in almost any subject, but there are two main types of master's: taught and research (see below).

Most master's courses lead to an MA (Master of Arts) or MSc (Master of Science) qualification, but there are also subject-specific qualifications including MEng (Master of Engineering), MFA (Master of Fine Arts), LLM (Master of Laws), MArch (Master of Architecture), and more. Courses leading to an MPhil (Master of Philosophy) qualification are research-led and often designed for students to progress to a PhD.

- MBA courses. A Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is an internationally recognised qualification which gives you the skills you need for a successful management career. MBA courses cover topics such as business policy and strategy, operational and strategic management, marketing, market research, finance and accounting, IT, human resource management, leadership, entrepreneurship and international trade.
- PhDs/doctorates. A Doctor of Philosophy, or doctorate (PhD/DPhil) is the highest academic level a student can achieve. These degrees are very demanding and often lead to careers in academia (as a lecturer or researcher). Doctorate courses can be applied for by students who achieve at least a 2:1 result at undergraduate level. Although you don't necessarily need a master's degree, it is usual practice to undertake one before a PhD.
- Postgraduate diplomas and qualifications. For those wishing to continue their studies beyond an undergraduate degree, a variety of options are available. Postgrad certificates and diplomas allow students to study something new or build on the skills and knowledge already gained during their first degree.
- Professional and vocational qualifications. A professional or vocational qualification is usually taken to improve skills or gain attributes required by specific jobs. Most awards will involve practical training, giving you the opportunity to experience a job first-hand.
- Conversion courses. A conversion course is a vocational postgraduate qualification usually taken by graduates wanting to change subject area after their first degree and better prepare themselves for the job market.

Taught postgraduate programmes consist of a series of lectures and exams and/or coursework assessment. **Research** postgraduate programmes involve in-depth study of a specific field, usually over a period of two or three years. You then report on your research by writing it in the form of a thesis or dissertation.

Subjects and modules

Most higher education courses have a 'modular' structure. This means that you can build a personalised course by choosing modules or units of study from different subject areas. For example, if you are studying English literature, for your first year you could choose one module on Science fiction, one module on Children's literature, and one module on Short stories.

If you are interested in more than one subject, you may be able to study a combination as part of your course, e.g. English literature and psychology. You can often decide for yourself how much time you would like to spend on each subject. 'Joint' means the two subjects are studied equally (50/50), 'major/minor' means the time spent is usually 75%/25%.

Work experience

Some courses include a year of working in industry – for example, working for a business, charity or public sector organisation. This will usually be for the third year of a degree course or the second year of an HND and, depending on the employer, may be full-time paid employment. The purpose of this is to introduce you to the world of work, while gaining valuable experience in a profession you might consider after completing your higher education course. Check your visa status allows you to do this before applying.

Study modes

Most full-time undergraduate courses take three years to complete (typically four years in Scotland). Full-time postgraduate courses can be from one year upwards.

Part-time courses are normally taken over a longer period, so that you can work alongside your studies or learn at a more relaxed pace. There is no set length of time for part-time courses – it varies from one course to another. If you need a visa to study in the UK, please check your immigration status allows you to do a part-time course at [UK Visas and Immigration](#).

As well as studying on campus in the UK, you could choose to study outside the UK – for example, by distance learning or by joining a UK overseas campus. Find out more in our [Study for a UK qualification... outside the UK](#) article.

The academic year

In the UK, the standard academic year starts in September or October and runs until June or July. Some courses are more flexible, however, and offer a range of start dates.

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