

The Right to Award UK Degrees



Guidance

Introduction

At the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) we take very seriously our responsibility for securing the academic standards of UK higher education. An important aspect of this is our advice to government on the decisions about who should have the right to award a UK degree.

A UK degree can be awarded only by an authorised degree-awarding body (usually a university) which has overall responsibility for the standard and quality of the qualification. This applies even if all or part of the course is provided by a separate college or organisation. The same requirement also applies to other higher education qualifications (graduate and postgraduate diplomas and certificates).

Once granted, degree awarding powers (DAP) and the right to be called a university ('university title' or UT) cannot be easily removed. It is therefore very important to have a robust process in place to ensure that these privileges are granted only to institutions that properly merit them. The Privy Council (a formal body of advisers to the Queen) is responsible for decisions about DAP and UT.

Government ministers in Westminster and the devolved administrations seek advice from us in coming to their decisions. This is one of our most important responsibilities since, in making recommendations, we are helping to redefine the UK higher education sector and safeguard its worldwide reputation.

Assuring the public about genuine UK degrees

All genuine UK degree courses are approved by a university or other legally recognised degree-awarding body, which will award the final qualification.

Universities and other institutions that have the power to award UK degrees are known by the UK government as 'recognised bodies'. There are over 150 of them (153 in 2014).

Other colleges that are approved to provide full higher education programmes **on behalf of** recognised bodies are known as 'listed bodies'. They do not in themselves have the right to award degrees.

Before enrolling on a higher education course, students and their advisers should be aware which degree-awarding body validates the course and awards the qualification.

Complete lists of recognised and listed bodies can be found at www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees#recognised-bodies.

The legal status of UK universities and degrees

Older universities operate under a Royal Charter. Some of these charters go back many centuries: the universities of Oxford and Cambridge received theirs in the thirteenth century, and in Scotland the universities of St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen were granted theirs in the fifteenth.

A number of newer universities were created following two Acts of Parliament in 1992. The *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* (FHEA) and the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992* authorised the Privy Council to specify providers of higher education as competent to award taught and research degrees. The Privy Council was also authorised to approve the use of the word 'university' (including 'university college') in the title of a higher education provider.

Most universities have the power to award foundation degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees and doctoral degrees. Following amendments to the FHEA in 2008 and 2010, further education colleges in England and Wales, respectively, can also be granted the right to award foundation degrees. See table 1.

The status of all universities and degree-awarding bodies is recognised and protected by UK law. The term 'degree' is similarly protected. The Privy Council is responsible for advising the Queen on universities' proposals to amend their Royal Charter (or Articles/Instrument of Government in the case of post-1992 universities).

Table 1: UK degrees and the powers to award them

| Type of degree | Level in UK frameworks for higher education qualifications ¹ | | Level in European qualifications framework ² | Powers necessary |
|---------------------------------------|---|----------|---|--|
| | England, Wales and Northern Ireland | Scotland | | |
| Doctoral degree (or doctorate) | Level 8 | Level 12 | End of third cycle | Research degree awarding powers (RDAP) |
| Research master's degree ³ | Level 7 | Level 11 | End of second cycle | |
| Taught master's degree ⁴ | | | | |
| Bachelor's degree with honours | Level 6 | Level 10 | End of first cycle | Taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) |
| Ordinary bachelor's degree | | Level 9 | | |
| Foundation degree | Level 5 | | Short cycle | Foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP) |

Types of degree awarding powers

There are three different types of degree awarding power that an institution can have:

- research degree awarding powers (RDAP)
- taught degree awarding powers (TDAP)
- foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP).

RDAP and TDAP are the powers traditionally exercised by universities. FDAP are newer powers, typically granted to further education colleges. Each type of power is explained below. There are specific government criteria that must be met for each; see page 4.

Research degree awarding powers (RDAP)

These powers are held by nearly all UK universities, entitling them to award any degree on the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications (see table 1). Institutions that already hold taught degree awarding powers (see below) may apply for RDAP in order to gain the additional right to award doctoral degrees and research master's degrees³ subject to them meeting the criteria for RDAP.

Taught degree awarding powers (TDAP)

These powers give UK higher education providers the right to award taught degrees on the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, including any bachelor's degree, up to the level of a taught master's degree (see table 1).⁴ Institutions with TDAP are expected to have a demonstrable track record in planning, providing and assessing courses for taught degrees.

¹ *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS)*. See the Quality Code, Part A, Chapter A1: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/qualifications-frameworks

² A framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area: www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=67

³ Master's degree where the student spends more time on original research than on taught or guided study.

⁴ Master's degree where the student spends more time on taught or guided study than on original research.

Foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP)

These powers give further education colleges in England (since 2008) and Wales (since 2010) the right to award foundation degrees only. First offered in 2001, foundation degrees are employment-focused academic qualifications that normally last two years and are at level 5 on the FHEQ (see table 1), one level below a bachelor's degree. To gain these powers, colleges must demonstrate their ability to achieve an appropriate blend of academic and work-based learning and must meet the relevant government criteria.

Characteristics of applicants for DAP

Applicants for all types of DAP must be able to demonstrate that they are well managed institutions with an established track record in providing higher education, meeting a range of criteria relevant to the type of powers sought (see page 4).

Institutions suitable for RDAP

Applicants for RDAP must demonstrate that they meet stringent criteria relating to their academic track record and the characteristics of their scholarly research community. This includes the expectation that they employ academic staff who are actively involved in the advancement of their own discipline and command the respect and confidence of academic peers across the higher education sector.

Institutions suitable for TDAP

Applicants for TDAP must be well managed, cohesive and self-critical academic communities with a proven track record of effectively planning and providing higher education courses. They should have at least four consecutive years' experience of providing courses at bachelor's level (awarded by a recognised body that already has TDAP and/or RDAP). Standards must be rigorously set and maintained in line with the Quality Code, making use of the UK Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications and Subject Benchmark Statements.⁵ Effective internal quality assurance systems must be in place to show that this is the case. The majority of the institution's higher education students must be studying at bachelor's level (FHEQ Level 6; FQHEIS Level 9/10). Applicants must demonstrate to us that they meet these conditions, as detailed in the guidance.

Institutions suitable for FDAP

FDAP are available to further education institutions in England and Wales. Applicants are required to have at least a four-year track record of providing higher education (level 5 or equivalent as a minimum) on behalf of a university or other recognised degree-awarding body. Colleges applying for these powers must demonstrate that they meet all the criteria in the guidance.

Characteristics of applicants for UT

Institutions applying for university title (UT) must already hold TDAP. In Scotland and Northern Ireland they are normally expected to hold RDAP. Applicants need to have had a successful outcome from their last QAA review and to meet the relevant government criteria that apply.

The criteria for being able to call an institution a university in England changed in June 2012. In England an organisation wishing to apply for approval to use the title 'university' must:

- have been granted powers to award taught degrees
- normally have at least 1,000 full time equivalent higher education (FTE) students, of whom at least 750 are registered on degree courses (including foundation degree programmes), and the number of FTE students must exceed 55 per cent of the total number of FTE students
- be able to demonstrate that it has regard to the principles of good governance as are relevant to its sector.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, applicants for UT are expected to have at least 300 FTE students in five subject areas. They should have at least 4,000 FTE enrolled students, including at least 3,000 FTE students on degree level courses. Applicants should also have at least 60 current research registrations and more than 30 Doctor of Philosophy (or direct equivalent) conferments.

⁵ See www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statements.aspx

Government guidance and criteria

The UK government and devolved administrations maintain the guidance for DAP and UT applications. These set out the conditions and criteria that must be met, the evidence required, and other important details. There are three sets of guidance:

- the 1999 guidance
- the 2004 guidance
- the 2010 guidance

All three, together with the degree awarding powers Handbook for applicants, can be accessed from the QAA website:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput/guidance-and-criteria

Which guidance is relevant to you depends on what your institution is applying for and where in the UK you are based.

1999 guidance

This is relevant to applicants for TDAP, RDAP and UT in Scotland and Northern Ireland. When published in 1999 it applied to the whole of the UK, but in England and Wales it has been superseded by the 2004 guidance.

2004 guidance

This is relevant to applicants for TDAP, RDAP and UT in England and Wales. It was published by the UK government in 2004 and updated in 2012 to reflect changes in the requirements for university title.

2010 guidance

This is relevant to applicants for FDAP in England and Wales. Foundation degrees were introduced in 2001 and were initially awarded by existing degree-awarding bodies. Since 2008 in England and 2010 in Wales, further education colleges have been permitted to apply for the power to award this type of degree only. The 2010 guidance reflects this situation. It is supported by a companion guide and a series of frequently asked questions.

Discussing and making an application

For an initial discussion about your institution's suitability it's best to get in touch with us at QAA: email daputenquiries@qaa.ac.uk or call **01452 557000**.

Once you have established that your institution is potentially suitable, you will need to prepare a formal application and send it to the Privy Council. Our dedicated web area

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput provides links to the relevant guidance, together with the Handbook for applicants which explains what is required, where to send an application, and what happens during and after the application and QAA scrutiny processes.

The necessary evidence

In brief, you will need to submit a critical self-analysis of your institution and a body of evidence to support it. Accompanying these should be a set of tables (based on templates we provide) indicating where in the self-analysis and evidence you address the criteria that must be met. The self-analysis document should be prefaced by a letter from the chair of your governing body and accompanied by a letter from the head of your main awarding body, providing a commentary on your application.

For **TDAP** and **FDAP** in **England** and **Wales**, evidence must be submitted under four broad headings:

- governance and academic management
- academic standards and quality assurance
- scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of academic staff⁶
- environment supporting the delivery of programmes.

For **RDAP** in **England** and **Wales** the headings match the three criteria in the guidance, which can be summarised as:

- employing staff with suitable advanced knowledge to supervise research, and who command the respect of their academic peers nationally
- demonstrating that they have a strong underpinning culture that nurtures high-quality research and scholarship
- meeting the expectations of relevant national guidance on research degrees
- having a proven track record of successfully supervising doctoral candidates.

For **TDAP** in **Scotland** and **Northern Ireland** the evidence must demonstrate that all criteria are met under four broad categories:

- governance and management
- quality assurance
- administrative systems
- academic staffing.

For **RDAP** in **Scotland** and **Northern Ireland** the first three categories are the same as for TDAP. Under the fourth, the criteria are more challenging, and there is also a fifth category relating to the research environment.

Full details, including the additional evidence required for UT, are given in the relevant guidance (see page 4).

The assessment process

The Privy Council, through the relevant government department, will ask QAA to consider your application. This will be done initially by our expert committee, the Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers (ACDAP; see table 2).

This advisory role invests us with significant responsibility for maintaining the international high standing of UK higher education. We protect the interests of students and the public by ensuring that our scrutiny process is rigorous, setting the bar high.

ACDAP considers the application and, if the Committee is satisfied that the application and supporting evidence merits further detailed scrutiny, we appoint a scrutiny team to evaluate and rigorously test the evidence upon which your claims to meet the criteria are based.

The scrutiny team members consider the documentary evidence and visit your institution for meetings and observations. Against the relevant criteria, they assess the capability of your institution to set and maintain academic standards that meet UK expectations across all your degrees courses, wherever they are provided.

The scrutiny team compiles a report for ACDAP which makes a recommendation to inform the Board's decision about QAA's advice to government. The advice is given in confidence. The final decision rests with the Privy Council, which will inform you of the outcome of your application.

⁶ See our 2013 guidance on *Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of staff*:
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/guidance-FDAP-TDAP.aspx

Table 2: Membership of the Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers (ACDAP)

| Structure of ACDAP | |
|---|-------------------|
| Category | Number of members |
| Independent Chair | 1 |
| Members representing the QAA Board | 2 |
| Members with current or recent experience of working at a strategic and international level for a UK degree-awarding body, and/or with responsibility for areas covered by the criteria | 7 (maximum) |
| Members providing the perspective of a major employer or professional body | 2 |
| Member with a background in college-based higher education | 1 |
| Member co-opted by the QAA Board | 1 |
| Student member | 1 (maximum) |

Costs

These are based on the type of awarding powers applied for and whether the applicant organisation is a subscriber to QAA. The breakdown of costs is shown in the table.

Table 3: The cost of an application

| Applicant | Initial assessment | FDAP fee | TDAP fee | RDAP fee | Additional costs |
|---|--|----------|----------|----------|---|
| Subscribers to QAA (for at least two years) | £2,500 (paid by cheque at time of application) | £40,000 | | £28,000 | £2,000 for additional visits (if needed) |
| Non-subscribers | Additional up-front fee of £5,000 (if exploratory visit is needed) | £60,000 | | N/A | Other chargeable costs may be notified in advance |

UT fees will be considered on an individual case by case basis reflecting the activity that will need to be conducted.

Confidentiality

We are appointed by government to do this work which is of a confidential, advisory nature. Unlike the reports of our quality assurance reviews, DAP and UT scrutiny reports are not published on our website.

Permanency of the powers, and quality assurance

Once granted, degree awarding powers and university title cannot be easily removed. Organisations in the publicly funded higher education sector will be granted TDAP and RDAP on an indefinite basis. All remaining organisations, including applicants for FDAP, will be granted their powers for a fixed term of six years, after which they can apply to the Privy Council for renewal, subject to a satisfactory review by us.

All universities and other institutions that possess degree awarding powers of any kind must become subscribers to QAA and must undergo our regular reviews, typically once every six years.

Further information

From time to time there may be changes to government policy on DAP and UT. Changes will be posted on our website at www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput.

For further information or advice please email daputenquiries@qaa.ac.uk or call 01452 557000.

Contact us



qaa.ac.uk



enquiries@qaa.ac.uk



+44 (0) 1452 557000

QAA 1018 – Dec 2014

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2014
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester, GL1 1UB

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786