

The Right to Award UK Degrees



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 decisions about who should have the right to award a UK degree. 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. A UK degree can be awarded only by an authorised degree-awarding body (typically 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.

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.

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.

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.

Following amendments to the FHEA in 2008 and 2010, further education colleges in England and Wales, respectively, can 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 Qualifications Frameworks ¹		Level in European qualifications framework ²	Powers necessary
	England, Wales and Northern Ireland	Scotland		
Doctoral degree (or doctorate)	Level 8	Level 12	Third cycle	Research degree awarding powers (RDAP)
Research master's degree ³	Level 7	Level 11	Second cycle	
Taught master's degree ⁴				
Bachelor's degree with honours	Level 6	Level 10	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:

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

Each type of power is explained below. There are specific government criteria that must be met for each; see page 4.

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 Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ, the relevant [UK Qualifications Framework](#); 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.

Taught degree awarding powers (TDAP)

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

Research degree awarding powers (RDAP)

These powers entitle UK higher education institutions to award any degree on the UK Qualifications Frameworks (see table 1). Institutions that already hold TDAP may apply for RDAP in order to gain the additional right to award doctoral degrees and research master's degrees.

¹ *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies:* www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2843

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.

Characteristics of applicants for degree awarding powers

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. They must be self-critical, cohesive academic communities with a proven commitment to quality assurance supported by effective quality and enhancement systems, as set out in the relevant guidance and must meet a range of criteria relevant to the type of powers sought (see page 5).

Institutions eligible 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). Colleges applying for these powers must demonstrate that they meet all the criteria in the guidance.

Institutions eligible for TDAP

Applicants for TDAP should have at least four consecutive years' experience of providing courses at bachelor's level. Standards must be rigorously set and maintained in line with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, making use of the [UK Qualifications Frameworks](#) 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 or above. Applicants must demonstrate that they meet these conditions, as detailed in the Guidance ('pre-application criteria').

Institutions eligible for RDAP

Applicants for RDAP must meet the criteria for TDAP and must also demonstrate that they meet stringent additional 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.

Characteristics of applicants for university title

Institutions in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland applying for university title (UT) or university college title must already hold TDAP. In Scotland and Northern Ireland they are also expected to hold RDAP. Applicants need to have had a successful outcome from their last QAA review and to meet the criteria in the relevant government Guidance.

The criteria for being able to call an institution a university in England changed in September 2015. In England an organisation wishing to apply for approval to use the title 'university' or 'university college' must:

- have been granted powers to award taught degrees
- be able to demonstrate that it has regard to the principles of good governance as are relevant to its sector.

In addition, applicants for university title must:

- 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 higher education students must exceed 55 per cent of the total number of FTE students.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, applicants for UT are expected to have at least 300 FTE higher education 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 degree registrations and more than 30 Doctor of Philosophy (or direct equivalent) conferments.

⁵ QAA Subject Benchmark Statements: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a

Government guidance and criteria

The UK government and devolved administrations maintain the Guidance for DAP and UT applications. These publications set out the conditions and criteria that must be met, the evidence required, and other important details. The following details are applicable at time of publication (January 2016).

Applicants for DAP or UT in England

Applicants for FDAP must meet the **October 2015 Guidance** (gov.uk website).

Applicants for TDAP must meet the **September 2015 Guidance** (gov.uk website).

Applicants for RDAP must meet the additional criteria in the **September 2015 Guidance**.

Applicants for UT or university college title must meet the **2015 Guidance on university title** (gov.uk website).

Applicants for DAP or UT in Wales

Applicants for FDAP must meet the **Welsh Government's Guidance** (gov.wales website).

Applicants for TDAP must meet the **2004/2011 Guidance** (gov.uk website).

Applicants for RDAP must meet the additional criteria in the **2004/2011 Guidance**.

Applicants for UT or university college title must meet the additional criteria in the **2004/2011 Guidance**.

Applicants for DAP or UT in Scotland and Northern Ireland

Applicants for TDAP must meet the **1999 Guidance** (QAA website).

Applicants for RDAP must meet the additional criteria in the **1999 Guidance**.

Applicants for UT or university college title must meet the additional criteria in the **1999 Guidance**.

Further information

Further information, documentation and links to the above guidance are available on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput/guidance-and-criteria

Discussing and making an application

If you represent a higher education institution and wish to discuss its suitability to apply for DAP, you should [contact us](#) at QAA for an initial discussion. You may also wish to talk to the government ministry/body that will process your application (in England this is the HEFCE).

Once you have established that your institution is potentially eligible, you will need to prepare a formal application and send it to the relevant higher education ministry/body.

Applicants submit a critical self-analysis of their institution, prefaced by a letter from the chair of the governing body, and accompanied by a body of evidence to support the application. It is also accompanied by a letter from the head of the applicant's main degree-awarding body, providing a commentary on the application.

Our dedicated web area www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput provides the necessary resources for applicants: links to the government Guidance; handbooks containing detailed information on the application process; and the templates to be used for submitting evidence.

The application process

Applications are first submitted to the Privy Council (applicants in Northern Ireland, Wales or Scotland) or to HEFCE (applicants in England). Once a DAP application has been received, the relevant government higher education ministry/body asks QAA to consider it. Our expert committee, the Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers (ACDAP; see table 2), takes responsibility for this.

If a case has been made to proceed, we appoint a scrutiny team to test the evidence provided by the applicant, through a planned programme of meetings and observations at the institution. The scrutiny team checks whether the relevant criteria are met, assessing the applicant's capability to set and maintain academic standards that meet UK expectations across all its degrees courses, wherever they are provided.

The scrutiny team compiles a report for ACDAP, which makes a recommendation to the QAA Board. This informs the Board's confidential advice to government via HEFCE (for applications in England). The final decision rests with the Privy Council.

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	up to 7
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 or 2
Student member	1

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 table 3.

Table 3: The cost of an application

Applicant	Initial assessment	FDAP fee	TDAP fee	RDAP fee	Additional costs
Subscribers to QAA (minimum two years)	£2,500 (plus additional £5,000 if a fact-finding visit is needed)	£40,000		£28,000	£2,000 for additional visits (if needed) plus any other chargeable costs may be (notified in advance)
Non-subscriber		£60,000		N/A	

Fees for applications for combined powers, or university title, will be considered on an individual case-by-case basis reflecting activities that are required.

Confidentiality

For details of what records we will publish, and when, see our Policy on the Disclosure of Records, details of which are on our website.⁶

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 QAA or another authorised body.

All universities and other institutions that possess degree awarding powers of any kind must become subscribers to QAA and undergo quality assurance review activity as required by government.

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 [contact us](#).

⁶ Policy on the Disclosure of Records: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput/further-information

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