

# The Right to Award UK Degrees



Guidance  
August 2018

## 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 the relevant government bodies 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 for UK institutions, with the exception of institutions in England that applied after 1 April 2018, for whom this responsibility rests with the Office for Students.

## 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 around 175 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.

From April 2018, all institutions in England must be registered with the Office for Students in order to apply for degree awarding powers and to maintain the right to award degrees. The register is available at: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register).

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/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised](http://www.gov.uk/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised).

## 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* 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 in 2008 and 2010 to the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, 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). Since the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*, the Office for Students has express powers to vary or revoke degree awarding powers in England, including where authorisation was originally made under Acts or Royal Charters, subject to agreement by Parliament.

**Table 1: UK degrees and the powers to award them**

Type of degree	Level in UK Qualifications Frameworks <sup>1</sup>		Level in European qualifications framework <sup>2</sup>	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 <sup>3</sup>	Level 7	Level 11	Second cycle	
Taught master's degree <sup>4</sup>			Level 6	Level 10
Bachelor's degree with honours	Level 5	Level 9		
Ordinary bachelor's degree				Short cycle

<sup>1</sup> [The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#)

<sup>2</sup> [A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area](#)

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

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

## Types of degree awarding powers

There are 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).

\* for institutions in England, TDAP can include authorisation to grant awards up to and including bachelor degrees only (that is up to and including level 6) or all taught awards (that is up to and including level 7).

Each type of power is explained below. There are specific government criteria that must be met for each which are outlined on page 5.

### 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 and must meet the relevant government criteria. Since 2018, TDAP for institutions in England can include authorisation to grant awards up to and including bachelor degrees only (that is up to and including level 6) or all taught awards (that is up to and including level 7).

### 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.

Authorisation to grant degree awarding powers normally entitles higher education institutions to make awards of any description. The *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* introduced changes for institutions in England whereby authorisation can also be granted to specified awards only (for example BSc Maths) or for awards of a specified description (for example only at bachelor level, or only in particular subject areas). The types and limitations of awards granted to institutions in England are published on the Office for Student's register.

## **Extent and permanency of the powers**

Authorisation to grant degree awarding powers is in the form of an order from the Privy Council or Office for Students. The order sets out the type of degree awarding powers granted, the extent of authorisation and the period that the authorisation takes effect. Institutions are granted full authorisation on an indefinite, time-limited or renewable basis depending on the government criteria under which they applied and/or their status in the publicly funded higher education sector. Under the new Regulatory Framework, institutions in England can also be granted degree awarding powers on a probationary basis for a limited period, which are subject to certain restrictions, prior to being granted full authorisation. The variation, extension and/or renewal of powers can only be granted by the Privy Council or Office for Students subject to criteria and conditions specified by the relevant authority being met.

All institutions that possess degree awarding powers of any kind must undergo any quality assurance review activity required by the relevant government. In addition, under the new Regulatory Framework, degree-awarding bodies in England must be registered with the Office for Students and meet all ongoing conditions of registration in order to retain degree awarding powers. The Office for Students has express powers to revoke degree awarding powers for higher education providers in England if conditions of registration are not maintained.

## **Characteristics of applicants for degree awarding powers**

Applicants for all types of DAP must be able to demonstrate that they are well managed institutions.

The overarching criterion is that they must be self-critical, cohesive academic communities with a proven commitment to quality assurance, as set out in the relevant guidance and institutions must meet a range of criteria relevant to the type of powers sought (see below). Institutions in England applying for probationary degree awarding powers must demonstrate that this overarching criterion is met in prospect.

To apply for degree awarding powers, higher education providers must meet the eligibility requirements for the type of degree awarding powers they seek. These are outlined in the relevant government guidance and criteria (see page 5).

## **Characteristics of applicants for university title**

Institutions in the UK applying for university title (UT) or university college title must already hold full authorisation for 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 (where applicable) and to meet the criteria in the relevant government guidance, which includes specifications in the size of the applicants' higher education provision

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.

In England, institutions that applied for UT prior to 2018 were expected to have at least 1,000 full-time equivalent higher education (FTE) students, of whom at least 750 were



registered on degree courses (including foundation degree programmes), and the number of FTE higher education students must have exceeded 55 per cent of the total number of FTE students.

In England, applicants for UT from March 2019 are required to demonstrate that the number of FTE higher education students exceeds 55 per cent of the total number of FTE students, of which at least 50 percent must be on courses at level 6 or above on the FHEQ.

Further details are available in the government Guidance.

## **Guidance and criteria**

The publications below set out the conditions and criteria that must be met, the evidence required, and other important details. The following details are applicable to new applications at time of publication.

### **Applicants for DAP or UT in England**

Applicants for FDAP, TDAP, RDAP and UT must meet the criteria relevant to the powers sought as outlined in the Office for Student's *Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England* February 2018.

### **Applicants for DAP or UT in Wales**

Applicants for FDAP, TDAP and RDAP must meet the criteria relevant to the powers sought as outlined in the Welsh Government's *Degree Awarding Powers: guidance and criteria for applicants in Wales* (2017). Applicants for UT should contact the Welsh Government.

### **Applicants for DAP or UT in Scotland and Northern Ireland**

Applicants for TDAP, RDAP and UT must meet the relevant criteria for the powers sought as outlined in the 1999 QAA Guidance (replicated in the *Degree Awarding Powers and University Title in Scotland: Guidance and Criteria for Applicants* September 2016). Further information, documentation and links to the above guidance and criteria are available on the [QAA website](#).

From time to time there may be changes to government policy on DAP and UT. Changes will be posted on our website.

For further information or advice please [contact us](#).

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