

Quality issues

You need to know that your studies in the United Kingdom (UK) are worth undertaking, and that your education, and qualifications, will be worth having. Education in the UK has strict quality assurance and a standard recognised all over the world. Its unique system of quality control is followed by other countries.

1 The quality of United Kingdom qualifications

Both academic and professional UK qualifications are widely recognised all over the world. All national qualifications are subject to strict quality standards. In further and higher education institutions, these are overseen by government-appointed agencies. However, if your studies are directly linked to a career, or are part of professional qualifications (such as in medicine or dentistry), you should:

- Speak to the professional body in your own country to find out whether UK qualifications are acceptable
- Speak to your local British Council office.

2 The quality of United Kingdom institutions

If you come to the UK, there are simple ways to make sure that the institution you attend is up to standard. There are official bodies that check every sort of educational establishment, including English-language schools and independent schools. At school level, these checks will cover premises and welfare as well as educational standards.

3 English language courses

The British Council runs the English in Britain Accreditation Scheme (EiBA). Courses that are accredited are inspected regularly. A team of independent inspectors check:

- teaching
- accommodation
- welfare
- premises
- resources
- health and safety



All English language centres can apply for EiBA accreditation including colleges, universities, private language centres and short course providers for children.

English language courses at colleges of further education and universities are also inspected as part of the quality checks at these levels.

ARELS and BASELT became **English UK** on 12 May 2004

English UK works in partnership with the British Council on quality assurance: they published the English in the UK guide which is a list of all English language providers accredited by the British Council - covering English UK and non-affiliated institutions.

www.englishuk.com

For more information, refer to *Learn English in the United Kingdom* in this series and *Study English Teaching*.

www.britishcouncil.org/accreditation

Checklist: Checking the quality of your English language course

- Is the course accredited by the British Council through the English in Britain Accreditation Scheme? (if it is a language centre)
- Has it been checked by government inspectors as part of a routine inspection (if the course is running at a college of further education or a university)? If not, has the college or university tried to gain 'English in Britain' accreditation?
- If the institution is not accredited, what guarantees can it provide of the quality of its education?

4 Independent schools

Many independent schools are accredited by the Independent Schools Inspectorate, part of the Independent Schools Council (ISC). Accreditation is based on standards, general aspects of the school and the quality of teaching.

Membership of the ISC is voluntary, and not all independent schools are members. But all independent schools are registered with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the government education department for England and Wales, or the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), or the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI), or the National Assembly Training & Education Department (NATED). This means that they must meet required standards.

Is the education in independent schools as good as in state schools in the United Kingdom?

Independent schools do not have to follow any compulsory national curriculum or guidelines, but all pupils sit the same public examinations. Excellent examination results are often their best selling point.

Checklist: Assessing an independent school

- has the school been accredited by the Independent Schools Council?
- if not, what guarantees can it provide of the quality of its education?
- look at the examination results. But bear in mind that schools with the best results are likely to have the most difficult entrance examinations.

For more information refer to *Choosing your boarding school or college* in this series.



5 Further and higher education colleges

What are the differences between further education (FE) and higher education (HE) colleges?

Typically, an FE college will offer academic, career-based and professional qualifications in most subjects from foundation to degree level. You can start FE college at sixteen, but seventy-five per cent of students are over eighteen, and seventy-five per cent study part-time. Higher education (HE) is usually for students over eighteen and covers courses up to degree and postgraduate degree level.

What checks are there on further & higher education colleges?

International students may attend independent or state further and higher education colleges. State colleges are regulated by compulsory inspections. You can find inspection reports for state FE colleges on the web as follows:

- England: Current inspection reports at www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports/ or www.ali.gov.uk/htm/reports.asp
Institutions that have not been inspected recently may have older reports at www.lscdata.gov.uk/documents/inpsectionreports/index.html
- Wales: www.estyn.gov.uk/inspection_reports.asp or www.wfc.ac.uk/fefcw/feqa/index.html
- Scotland: www.hmie.gov.uk
- Northern Ireland: www.deni.gov.uk/inspection_services/index.htm

Independent colleges may be accredited by the British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education (BAC). BAC inspectors concentrate particularly on the needs of international students, such as English language support, advice on living in the UK, help with accommodation and thorough preparation for further studies and careers. (www.thecapability.uk.com/bac/index.html)

Some independent colleges may be members of the Council for Independent Further Education (CIFE) and must abide by CIFE's codes of conduct and practice. They must submit their examination results to the BAC. (www.getthegrade.co.uk/about.cfm)

Checklist: Choosing an independent further education college

- is the college accredited by the BAC?
- if not, is it a member of the CIFE?
- is the course recognised by the professional association in your country?
- Higher education

It is illegal in the UK to offer degrees or related qualifications (such as Bachelor, Master or Doctor) without proper authorisation. Those institutions which have been granted degree awarding powers are called 'Recognised Bodies'. All UK universities and some higher education colleges are Recognised Bodies. Many institutions which do not have the authority to award their own degrees may provide courses which lead to a degree of a recognised body. (For example, many colleges offer degree courses that are validated by a university). These institutions are called 'Listed Bodies'.

All Recognised and Listed bodies in the UK are all listed on the Department for Education and Skills web site at www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees.



What guarantees are there on the quality of degrees and teaching?

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the independent body responsible for the quality of education provision in UK institutions. It produces a Code of Practice which provides the institutions with guidelines on how they should manage academic standards and quality.

As well as setting standard guidelines the QAA also carries out inspections of institutions to see if they are reaching these targets.

These QAA inspections are called 'Institutional Audits' and the reports are published on the QAA website at: www.qaa.ac.uk/revreps/reviewreports.htm

As well as these broad, institution-wide inspections the QAA used to carry out 'Teaching Quality Assessments' (TQA) which looked at the quality of specific subject departments. All teaching departments in the UK were reviewed over a ten year period from 1992 to 2002. Under the current system the TQAs have been discontinued and only 10% of departments are reviewed as part of the institutional audit.

Previous TQA reports can also be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/revreps/reviewreports.htm

Can I compare institutions through these assessments?

The institutional audits are useful in that they will provide an overview of the quality assurance mechanisms within an institution and they will inform you whether the QAA has 'broad confidence', 'limited confidence' or 'no confidence' in the institutions' quality assurance procedures.

Teaching Quality Assessments used to provide a way of comparing departments. However different grading systems were used at different times in England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and you should be cautious in using results from these reviews as many of them are now several years old and departments can change rapidly.

Is there an official list that ranks UK universities?

There is no UK government or British Council list that ranks UK institutions. Each institution needs to be considered in terms of what you hope to get from the course and what the institution has to offer. The British Council can guide you through the information resources but can not tell you that one university is better than another.

In recent years there has been increasing consumer demand for lists that do rank UK institutions and you may find resources such as The Times Good University Guide (www.timesonline.co.uk) and The Guardian newspaper university guide (www.education.guardian.co.uk/universityguide) useful. Both of these unofficial rankings are compiled by pulling together information from various sources. These different types of information are not designed to be added together and averaged to give an overall mark and so these rankings may not accurately reflect the quality of an institution or course. If you do want to make use of these unofficial rankings make sure that you read introductory sections that explain how they have been put together.

How does this system work for professional qualifications that need common standards?

A separate assessment will be carried out by the relevant professional or vocational bodies for engineering, law, accounting, medicine, dentistry and teaching.

Is the quality of postgraduate research assessed?

Yes, through a Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) carried out by the various bodies that fund research. Distinguished academics in a particular subject look at the quality of work of their fellow researchers. The results are given on a scale of 1 (the lowest) to 5 and 5* (research considered to be world class).



The RAE assesses the quality of the research and not the quality of the teaching within the department. However, in general a university's status is closely related to the quality of the research that it does.

The RAE is a useful tool when looking at the quality of research but the most recent results are from the 2001 assessment and so the data is not current . The next review is not due until 2008.

The latest RAE results (2001) can be found on www.hero.ac.uk/rae/index.htm

Checklist: How to compare research departments

- look up the Research Assessment Exercise at www.hero.ac.uk/rae/index.htm
- look up the departments' submission to RAE which will describe the main areas of strength at www.hero.ac.uk/rae/submissions
- look up the research published by your chosen department and potential supervisor (usually found on the university or college website)
- bear in mind that other factors, such as prospective supervisors, the size of the department and the location of the institution, might be as important to you.

6 Distance learning

How can you ensure the quality of a distance learning course?

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is responsible for the quality of education provision offered by UK institutions. It has developed specific criteria covering distance and remote education. This means that the distance learning courses offered by recognised institutions must meet quality standards.

The QAA distance learning guidelines are at: www.qaa.ac.uk/public/dlg/intro.htm

In addition to the QAA , the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC) is the only officially recognised UK organisation that accredits distance learning courses. The ODLQC assesses administration, educational materials, tuition and publicity materials. (www.odlqc.org.uk)

For some subjects, particularly MBA and other business courses, institutions will also seek accreditation from specialist bodies such as the Association of MBAs.

Checklist: How to assess distance learning courses

- check if the course is accredited by the ODLQC www.odlqc.org.uk
- Is the qualification offered by a recognised UK organisation?
- What is the status and reputation of the local partner (where applicable)?
- Will the qualification be recognised in the UK?
- you should investigate in your own country whether distance learning courses are regarded as equal to conventional courses in your chosen subject (your local British Council office can often help you with this)
- Look at the learning support available to you.

For more information, refer to the *Distance Learning* sheets in this series.

7 Where can I find more information?

British Council Education information

Website www.educationuk.org

For further information, you can find details of your nearest office at www.britishcouncil.org/home-contact-worldwide.htm which includes links to all our country web pages and a worldwide address book giving contact details for all offices.

EducationUK Scotland

Website www.educationukscotland.org

English language courses in the UK

Website www.englishinBritain.co.uk

Independent schools

Website www.isinspect.org.uk

Scottish Executive Education Department

Victoria Quay
Edinburgh EH6 6QQ
Telephone +44 (0) 131 556 8400 or +44 (0) 845 774 1741
Fax +44 (0) 131 244 8240
Email ceu@scotland.gov.uk
Website www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Departments/ED

National Assembly for Wales (NATED)

Cardiff Bay
Cardiff CF99 1NA Tel: 029 20 825111

Department for Education and Skills (DfES)

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT
Telephone +44 (0) 870 000 2288
Fax +44 (0) 1928 794 248
Email info@dfes.gsi.gov.uk
Website www.dfes.gov.uk

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

Southgate House Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB
Telephone +44 (0) 14 5255 7000
Fax +44 (0) 14 5255 7070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Website www.qaa.ac.uk

The Council for Independent Further Education (CIFE)

Executive Secretary
Dr Norma Ball
75 Foxbourne Road
London SW17 8EN
Telephone +44 (0) 20 8767 8666
Website www.getthegrade.co.uk

Independent Schools Council Information Service (ISCis)

Grosvenor Gardens House
35-37 Grosvenor Gardens
London SW1W 0BS
Telephone +44 (0) 20 7798 1500
Fax +44 (0) 20 7798 1501
Email info@iscis.uk.net
Website www.iscis.uk.net

Independent Schools Inspectorate

11th Floor
Northway House
1379 High Road
Whetstone
London N20 9LP
Telephone +44 (0) 20 8445 6262
Fax +44 (0) 20 8445 7272
Email info@isinspect.org.uk
Website www.isinspect.org.uk

British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education (BAC)

42 Manchester Street
London W1U 7LW
Telephone +44 (0) 20 7224 5474
Fax +44 (0) 20 7224 5475
Email info@the-bac.org
Website www.thecapability.uk.com
Website www.learning.wales.gov.uk/

Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC)

16 Park Crescent
London W1B 1AH
Telephone +44 (0) 20 7612 7090
Fax +44 (0) 20 7612 7092
Email info@odqlc.org.uk
Website www.odqlc.org.uk

Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

24 Douglas Street
Glasgow G2 7NQ
Telephone +44 (0) 845 279 1000
Fax +44 (0) 141 242 2244
Email customer@sqa.org.uk
Website www.sqa.org.uk

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