

Benchmarking of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma in the Canadian System

SUMMARY REPORT



The SQA Advanced Diploma is comparable to the first two years of undergraduate study, and may be considered for admission to the third year of a Canadian Bachelor degree, at institutional discretion. The SQA Advanced Certificate may be considered for exemptions against the first year of a Canadian Bachelor degree programme.

1. Overview of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diplomas

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Advanced Certificate and Advanced Diploma¹ are higher education qualifications developed in partnership with colleges, universities and industry. The SQA Advanced qualifications are offered internationally in a range of subjects including but not limited to: accounting, architectural technology, art and design, business, chemical engineering, computing (with various specialisations), construction management, electronics, hospitality, hospitality management, mechanical engineering, quantity surveying, retail and retail management and travel and tourism.

This report is designed to provide guidance on the comparable academic standing of the two awards in the context of the Canadian education system.

Entry and duration

The SQA Advanced Certificate is a one-year programme, allocated 96 SCQF Points (960 notional learning hours). Entry requirements are set at the discretion of individual centres but may include National/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQ 2 or 3), other qualifications at Level 5 or 6 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), comparable work experience, or a centre-devised test. Programmes are assessed in English and as such entrants who are non-native speakers will typically also need an ESOL certificate at SCQF level 5 or an IELTS band 5.5 for admission.

Entry into an SQA Advanced Diploma course, which typically consists of two years of study², is the same as the entry requirements specified above. The first year comprises 1200 notional learning hours, with the total

¹ Previously known as the SQA Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND).

² Scottish Qualifications Authority, "Guide to SQA Advanced Qualifications," 3.

Diploma worth 240 SCQF Credit Points (2400 notional learning hours). Those already holding the SQA Advanced Certificate may enter the second year of the SQA Advanced Diploma programme.

Structure and content

The SQA Advanced qualifications have a unit-based structure³. Each subject has mandatory units, taken by all students, and a range of optional units allowing students to specialise in a particular area. For example, those undertaking the SQA Advanced Certificate in Hospitality would be expected to develop a general understanding of the hospitality industry and then specialise in hospitality management, professional cookery or events. Similarly those taking an SQA Advanced Certificate or Diploma in Business would have the opportunity to specialise in aspects of accounting and finance, business culture, communication – research skills, customer service, e-commerce, economics, enterprise and employability, financial services, human resource management, information technology, international business, legal, management skills, marketing/sales, mathematics and statistics, office skills, personal and social development, public administration, supply chain management or sustainability.

Aims and learning outcomes

Aims are generally stated for each subject group, and can be broadly summarised as follows:

- To ensure students will be prepared for employment
- To develop study and research skills
- To develop transferable skills including Core Skills for employment: communication, numeracy, information and communication technology, problem solving and working with others.

Specific aims are also set for each award, detailing the subject-specific knowledge and skills that should be developed.

The SQA Advanced Certificate is placed at Level 7 of the SCQF, and the SQA Advanced Diploma at Level 8, where students at these levels should be able to demonstrate knowledge and skills such as the following:

| | Indicators of SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Certificate) | Indicators of SCQF Level 8 (Advanced Diploma) |
|---|--|--|
| Knowledge and understanding | Demonstrate and/or work with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overall appreciation of the body of knowledge that constitutes a subject/discipline/sector. • Knowledge that is embedded in the main theories, concepts and principles of the subject / discipline / sector. • An awareness of the dynamic nature of knowledge and understanding. • An understanding of the difference between explanations based on evidence and/or research and other sources, and of the importance of this difference. | Demonstrate and/or work with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A knowledge of the scope, defining features, and main areas of the subject / discipline / sector. • Specialist knowledge in some areas. • A discerning understanding of a defined range of core theories, concepts, principles and terminology. • Awareness and understanding of some major current issues and specialisms. • Awareness and understanding of research and equivalent scholarly/academic processes. |
| Practice: Applied knowledge, skills and understanding | Apply knowledge, skills and understanding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In practical contexts. • In using some of the basic and routine professional skills, techniques, practices and/or materials associated with the subject/discipline/sector. • To practise these in both routine and non-routine contexts. | Apply knowledge, skills and understanding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In using a range of professional skills, techniques, practices and/or materials associated with the subject/discipline/sector, a few of which are advanced and/or complex. • In carrying out routine lines of enquiry, development or investigation into professional level problems and issues. • To adapt routine practices within accepted standards. |

³ There is a fixed and a non-fixed framework for some of the SQA Advanced qualifications. Both frameworks have the same credit requirements; however the construction of the latter is more flexible and individual centres can choose to create their own content and structure, using guidelines provided by SQA.

| | Indicators of SCQF Level 7 (Advanced Certificate) | Indicators of SCQF Level 8 (Advanced Diploma) |
|--|---|--|
| Generic cognitive skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present and evaluate arguments, information and ideas that are routine to a subject/discipline/sector. Use a range of approaches to address defined and/or routine problems and issues within familiar contexts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake critical analysis, evaluation and/or synthesis of ideas, concepts, information and issues that are within the common understandings in a subject/discipline/sector. Use a range of approaches to formulate and critically evaluate evidence-based solutions/responses to defined and/or routine problems and issues. |
| Communication, ICT and numeracy skills | <p>Use a wide range of routine skills and some advanced skills associated with a subject/discipline/sector, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convey complex ideas in well-structured and coherent form. Use a range of forms of communication effectively in both familiar and unfamiliar contexts. Select and use standard ICT applications to process and obtain a variety of information and data. Use a range of numerical and graphical skills in combination. Use numerical and graphical data to measure progress and achieve goals/targets. | <p>Use a wide range of routine skills and some advanced and specialised skills associated with a subject/discipline/sector, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convey complex information to a range of audiences and for a range of purposes. Use a range of standard ICT applications to process and obtain data. Use and evaluate numerical and graphical data to measure progress and achieve goals/targets. |
| Autonomy, accountability and working with others | <p>Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities at a professional level in practice or in a subject/discipline/sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept supervision in less familiar areas of work. Exercise some managerial or supervisory responsibility for the work of others within a defined and supervised structure. Manage limited resources within defined areas of work. Take the lead in implementing agreed plans in familiar or defined contexts. Take account of own and others' roles and responsibilities when carrying out and evaluating tasks. Work, under guidance, with others to acquire an understanding of current professional practice. | <p>Exercise autonomy and initiative in some activities at a professional level in practice or in a subject/discipline/sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exercise managerial responsibility for the work of others within a defined structure. Manage resources within defined areas of work. Take the lead on planning in familiar or defined contexts. Practise in ways that show awareness of own and others' roles, responsibilities and contributions when carrying out and evaluating tasks. Work, under guidance, with others to acquire an understanding of current professional practice. Manage, under guidance, ethical and professional issues in accordance with current professional and/or ethical codes or practices |

Assessment and grading

The methods of assessment vary by subject and by centre; however these may include open-book assessments such as case studies, practical exercises and observations, written projects, portfolios, and oral presentations. SQA provides clear guidance to centres on designing valid and reliable assessments. For example, the Business Graded Unit 1, taken in both the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma, is assessed by a three hour closed-book examination consisting of two papers based on a previously seen case study. The Business Graded Unit 2, done towards the end of the SQA Advanced Diploma course is a project where candidates are given a real or simulated business problem to evaluate.

Students receive a final certificate and accompanying transcript detailing the units undertaken. Generally, units are graded on a pass or fail basis, with the exception of graded units which are marked out of 100 and are given a letter grade; C (50%) is the minimum pass grade.⁴

Certification and progression

On successful completion, candidates are awarded an SQA Advanced Certificate or an Advanced Diploma in their field of study. SQA Advanced Certificate holders may advance to further study, including to the second year of an Advanced Diploma. SQA has a Diploma to Degree programme⁵ to support progression

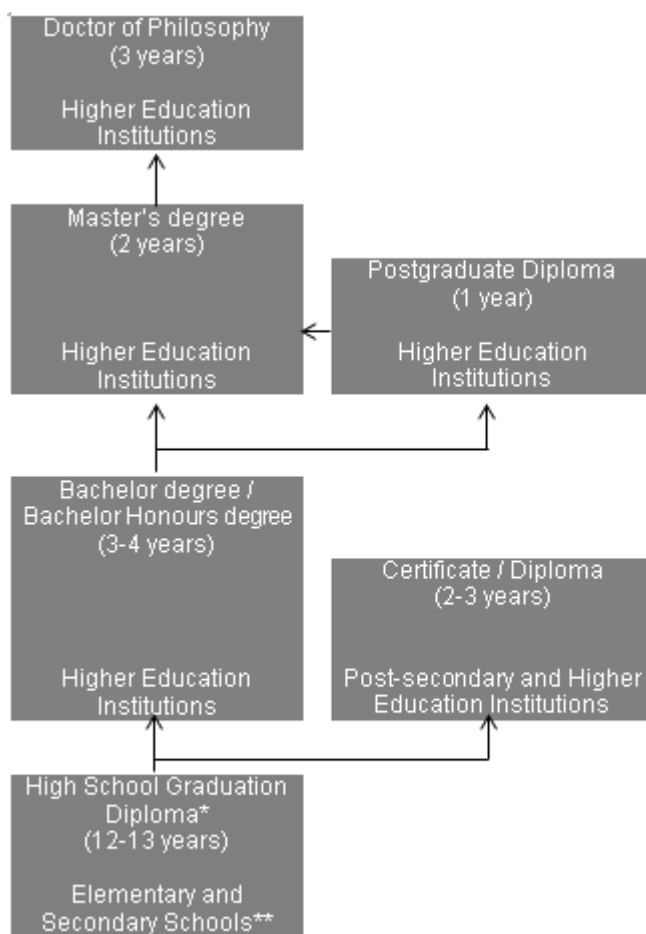
⁴ Scottish Qualifications Authority, "SQA Advanced Certificate in Business (GM8A 47) SQA Advanced Diploma in Business (GM8Y 48)," 30.

⁵ <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/79553.html>

for holders of the Advanced Diploma to the second or third year of study at an SQA Progression Partner university.

2. Comparative analysis with the Canadian education system

The education system in Canada is overseen at provincial or territorial level, although the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) is responsible for coordinating discussions on education policy and representing the Canadian education system internationally. Some provinces and territories have a ministry of education that oversees education at all levels, whilst others have two: one for education from kindergarten to high school, and another for higher education and research. Canada does not have a national qualifications framework⁶, although Ontario has a provincial framework, the Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF). The overall structure of the Canadian education system can be seen in the chart below:



*The title for the High School Graduation Diploma varies across Canada.

**The school structure varies across Canada.

Compulsory education in Canada usually starts at the age of six and lasts for ten years. The medium of instruction at school is English, French or Aboriginal languages. The structure of school education varies by province but an upper secondary award is typically awarded on successful completion of assessment in Grade 12 (Grade 13 in Quebec); with the qualifications awarded at this level typically comparable to the Scottish Advanced Highers (SCQF Level 7).

⁶ The Maritime Degree Level Qualifications Framework, covering New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, provides information on post-secondary undergraduate and graduate degree programmes which are not at a comparable level to SQA Level 7 and 8.

Entrance to undergraduate study in Canada is typically based on completion of the high school diploma⁷, although as institutions are autonomous they can set their own entrance requirements. Non-degree programmes tend to have more flexible entrance requirements. Entrance to postsecondary vocational education is typically based upon completion of the high school diploma, broadly comparable to the Scottish Advanced Highers at SCQF Level 7. The typical entry requirement for the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma is SCQF Level 5/6.

The duration of postsecondary Diplomas can vary by institution from one to three years, whilst the SQA Advanced Diploma is 2400 hours in terms of total qualification time over two years. This is slightly longer than the SQA Advanced Certificate (960 hours total qualification time over one year). Provincial variations are also evident, for example where the Ontario Level 7 Diploma programmes are typically four semesters or 1200-1400 equivalent instructional hours, and Ontario Level 8 Advanced Diploma programmes are six semesters or 1800-2100 equivalent instructional hours.

There are no nationwide structural or content rules leading to the postsecondary Diploma qualifications. Individual course examples for postsecondary Diplomas have been seen to include work placements in addition to institution-based study. Students taking a programme leading to the award of either an Ontario College Diploma or an Ontario College Advanced Diploma must be exposed to at least one discipline outside their main field of study that increases their awareness of the society and culture in which they live and work. This is often accomplished by students taking three to five general education courses that can be compulsory or elective choices.⁸

The mode of learning varies across the postsecondary Diploma programmes, as well as across the SQA Advanced qualifications. Providers are allowed to determine the most appropriate style of study according to the subject(s) of specialisation. Assessment methods also vary between institutions and may include academic essays, essay-based exams, informal writing (quizzes, short answer tests); oral reports, presentations, participation and performance in lectures and seminars, and other assignments. In addition, a capstone project and/or work placement may form part of the final assessment.

National-level learning outcomes are not defined for the post-secondary Diploma, and may vary according to the institution and programme. The OQF comprises 13 levels and its descriptors can provide a useful basis for comparison with the SCQF and Scottish awards therein. The OQF descriptors outline competencies that the holder of a specific qualification is expected to be able to demonstrate, with a focus on knowledge and skills transferable to the workplace or useful for further study. The main descriptor areas of the OQF include, 'Depth and Breadth of Knowledge', 'Conceptual & Methodological Awareness / Research and Scholarship', 'Communication Skills', 'Application of Knowledge', 'Professional Capacity / Autonomy' and 'Awareness of Limits of Knowledge'. Learning outcomes are also specified for programmes and individual courses that form part of a programme. There is some commonality with the aims of the SQA Advanced Certificate and descriptors for the Ontario College Diploma level (Level 6) of the OQF, where for example, '*develop candidate competencies in a range of specialist areas of their choice in line with their preferred career pattern*'⁹ and '*demonstrate the skill and knowledge requirements for successful performance in a complex occupational setting*'.¹⁰ The SCQF Level 7 (SQA Advanced Diploma) expectations, to be able to apply knowledge in using a range of professional, and sometimes advanced and/or complex skills associated with the student's chosen subject, best reflect the level of application

⁷ NB the nomenclature for the high school diploma varies across the different provinces and territories in Canada.

⁸ "Ontario Business Administration Program Standard," n.d., 27.

⁹ Scottish Qualifications Authority, "SQA Advanced Certificate in Business (GM8A 47) SQA Advanced Diploma in Business (GM8Y 48)," 5.

¹⁰ Government of Ontario, "Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF)," accessed February 28, 2019, <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/programs/oqf/>.

associated with Diploma II Level (Level 7). The OQF levels and qualification types are shown in the following table:

| OQF Level | Qualification Type |
|-----------|--|
| 13 | Doctoral degree |
| 12 | Master's degree |
| 11 | Baccalaureate / Bachelor's degree: Honours |
| 10 | Baccalaureate / Bachelor's degree |
| 9 | Post-Diploma Certificate |
| 8 | Advanced Diploma |
| 7 | Diploma II |
| 6 | Diploma I |
| 5 | Certificate III |
| 4 | Certificate of Qualification |
| 3 | Certificate of Apprenticeship |
| 2 | Certificate II |
| 1 | Certificate I |

Since the duration, structure and learning outcomes for Diplomas in other Canadian provinces/territories are set at an institutional level, they can vary by subject and institution; as such any comparability is best communicated in terms of potential articulation routes into a Canadian Bachelor degree. Credit from a Canadian college Diploma can often be transferred towards a Bachelor degree, which are typically four years and many public institutions in Canada have articulation agreements in place to facilitate this.

3. Key findings

The SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma are found to be well-designed and internationally-relevant programmes, noting in particular that they:

- Are developed with colleges, universities and employers – the qualification design process includes consultation with key external stakeholders designed and reference to National Occupational Standards, to help ensure the relevance of the SQA qualifications to learners and to labour market needs
- Have established progression routes in key destination countries including but not limited to the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, enabling students to top-up, with further study, to a Bachelor degree in a number of universities
- Provide career-focussed, practical learning: integrating core skills relevant to employment and with a structure that provides a well-rounded overview of the subject area as well as a specialisation through its combination of optional and mandatory units.

Having reviewed the entry requirements, duration, structure and content, modes of learning and assessment and learning outcomes (where available) and the associated progression outcomes across a range of Diploma programmes, UK NARIC would consider the SQA Advanced Diploma broadly comparable to the first two years of undergraduate study, providing advanced study to the third year of a Bachelor degree programme at institutional discretion. The SQA Advanced Certificate may be considered for credit exemptions towards the first year of a degree programme.

4. Methodology

Based on UK NARIC's well-established methodology for credential evaluation, this independent benchmarking study comprised a review of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma as well as national awards in the Canadian education system. This took into consideration the following core criteria:

- Entry requirements
- Duration
- Structure and content
- Modes of learning and assessment
- Learning outcomes
- Associated outcomes.

Relevant information on the Canadian education system and comparable qualifications was obtained from UK NARIC's *International Comparisons* database and official websites of Canadian education authorities and institutions.