

Benchmarking the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma in the Chinese Education System

SUMMARY REPORT



The SQA Advanced Diploma is considered comparable to the 专科毕业证书 (Graduate Certificate – Specialist/Sub-degree programme (*Zhuanke*)) in China. The SQA Advanced Certificate may provide advanced standing (Year 2 entry) to *Zhuanke* programmes, at institutional discretion.

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 Chinese 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.

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

² Scottish Qualifications Authority, “Guide to SQA Advanced Qualifications,” 3.

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 SQA Advanced Diploma. SQA has a Diploma to Degree programme⁵ to support

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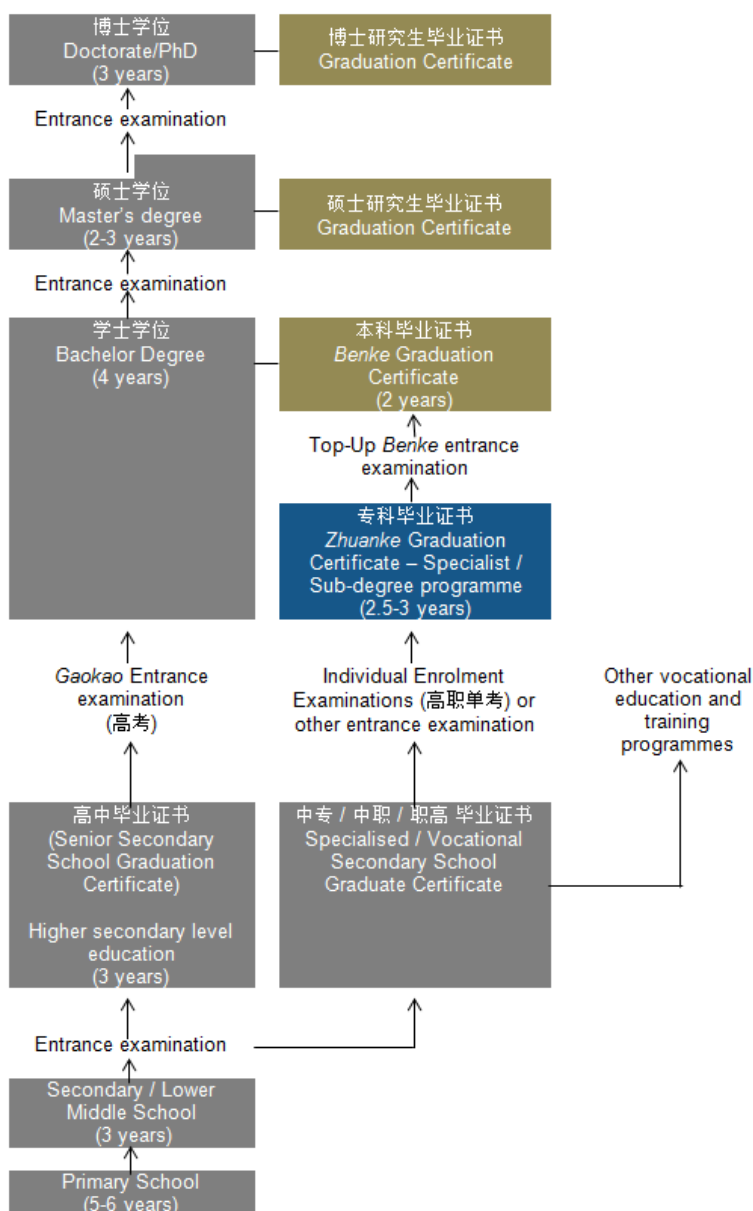
progression for holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma to the second or third year of study at an SQA Progression Partner university.

2. Comparative analysis with the Chinese education system

Compulsory education in China lasts for nine years and usually starts at the age of six. The medium of instruction at all levels of education is Mandarin Chinese, although minority languages such as Korean, Mongolian and Tibetan may be used in primary and lower secondary education in the areas in which they are spoken. The academic year runs from September to July and is divided into two semesters. There is no qualifications framework that is used across China.

The Ministry of Education (MoE - 教育部 *Jiaoyu Bu*) and the provincial departments of education are responsible for education at all levels, including some technical and vocational education. The Academic Degree Committee of the State Council (国务院学位委员会 *Guowuyuan Xuewei Weiyuanhui*) regulates degree programmes at the Bachelor, Master's and Doctorate levels. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS - 人力资源和社会保障部 *Renli Ziyuan he Shehui Baozhang Bu*) oversees and awards occupational qualification certificates.

The overall structure of the Chinese system can be seen below:



As shown in the chart, the *Zhuanke*, offered by specialist colleges (高等专科学校), vocational colleges (职业学院) and technical colleges (职业技术学院), is most similar in terms of entry requirements and progression routes to the SQA Advanced qualifications. The *Zhuanke* is offered in a range of subjects, including education and teaching, nursing, agriculture, construction, drama, engineering, finance, fine art, information technology, management, sports, technology and tourism. There is, additionally, a Preparatory Technician Certificate, awarded by MOHRSS. Training programmes leading to the Preparatory Technician Certificate are offered by technician colleges (技师学院) awarded upon passing an operational skills test and a theoretical knowledge test. The Bachelor degree is four years in duration.

Progression to tertiary academic or vocational studies under the MoE in China usually requires the following:

- Graduation from senior secondary school (高中) or specialised / vocational secondary school (中专 *zhongzhuān* / 中职 *zhongzhi* / 职高 *zhigāo*); and
- The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE - 普通高等学校招生全国统一考试 / 高考 *gaokāo* for short), the National Adult College Entrance Examination (NACEE - 成人高等学校招生全国统一考试 / 成人高考 *adult gaokāo* for short), or vocational college individual enrolment examinations (高职单考 *gaozhi dankāo*).

The Graduation Certificate from a specialised / vocational secondary school, which is the typical entry requirement for the *Zhuanke*, can be considered comparable to SCQF Level 6. The typical entry requirement for the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma is SCQF Level 5/6.

The SQA Advanced qualifications are shorter in overall duration than the *Zhuanke*. *Zhuanke* are typically 2.5- or 3-year programmes incorporating a 1- or 2-semester work experience placement or an internship, whereas the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma are one- and two- year programmes respectively. SQA Diploma Total Qualification Time is 2400 hours and full time courses are taken over two years. *Zhuanke* programmes tend to be very specialised and do not include many electives, although some general courses such as English, physical education / military training, IT and ideology-related classes may be included. These would similarly be found in a Bachelor degree course.

There are no structural rules for training programmes leading to the Preparatory Technician Certificate: individual course examples have been seen to comprise 10 Vocational ability courses totalling 1800 learning hours across two years of an award with one required career planning module of 16 hours across the duration of the award, one further compulsory course and two elective courses (from a choice of five) each requiring 120 learning hours. In another example, the Preparatory Technician Certificate in automotive maintenance totalled 2176 hours divided equally across four semesters. SQA Certificates Total Qualification Time is 960 hours and full-time courses are taken over one year.

The style of study varies across all programmes: providers of the *Zhuanke* and SQA awards are able to use the modes of learning most appropriate to the particular subject. In the SQA Advanced qualifications, this might include lecturing, group work, laboratory and practical work, computer simulation, project work and case studies. The use of open and distance learning and online materials may help to supplement and support the learning that takes place in the classroom, laboratory or workshop. Assessment methods can similarly vary, but typically assess both theoretical knowledge and application of skills, for example through a combination of examination and project work.

Programmes leading to the Preparatory Technician Certificate also blend theoretical design with practical operation and are designed for the practical needs of those destined to work in technically skilled jobs. Programmes include elements of both academic and practical training, and assessment is similarly designed to demonstrate both aspects of understanding and ability: through a knowledge test and an operational skills test.

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In terms of learning outcomes, these are not specified for the Chinese awards in publically available materials, although individual programmes may specify these at a programme- or module-level. As such, it is useful to consider the associated outcomes for the Chinese and Scottish awards in terms of progression to further study and employment. The SQA Advanced Diploma would offer similar progression routes to the *Zhuanke*: with students well prepared to enter top-up programmes. Holders of the *Zhuanke* can progress to a two- or three- year top-up programme (专升本) towards the *Benke*, and award of a Bachelor degree subject to successfully passing an entrance examination. This may be the adult *gaokao* or an institution-specific test. Holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma are able to progress onto the second or third year of an undergraduate degree.

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.

In the context of the Chinese education system, the SQA Advanced Diploma can be considered comparable to the 专科毕业证书 (Graduate Certificate – Specialist/Sub-degree programme (*Zhuanke*)) in China. Holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma may be considered for admission to a two-year top-up programme for the *Benke* / Bachelor degree, subject to successful completion of the national or institution-level entrance examination.

The SQA Advanced Certificate may provide advanced standing (Year 2 entry), at institutional discretion, to *Zhuanke* programmes, or be eligible for credit exemptions towards a *Benke* / Bachelor 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 Chinese 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 Chinese education system and comparable qualifications was obtained from UK NARIC's *International Comparisons* database and official websites of Chinese education authorities and institutions.