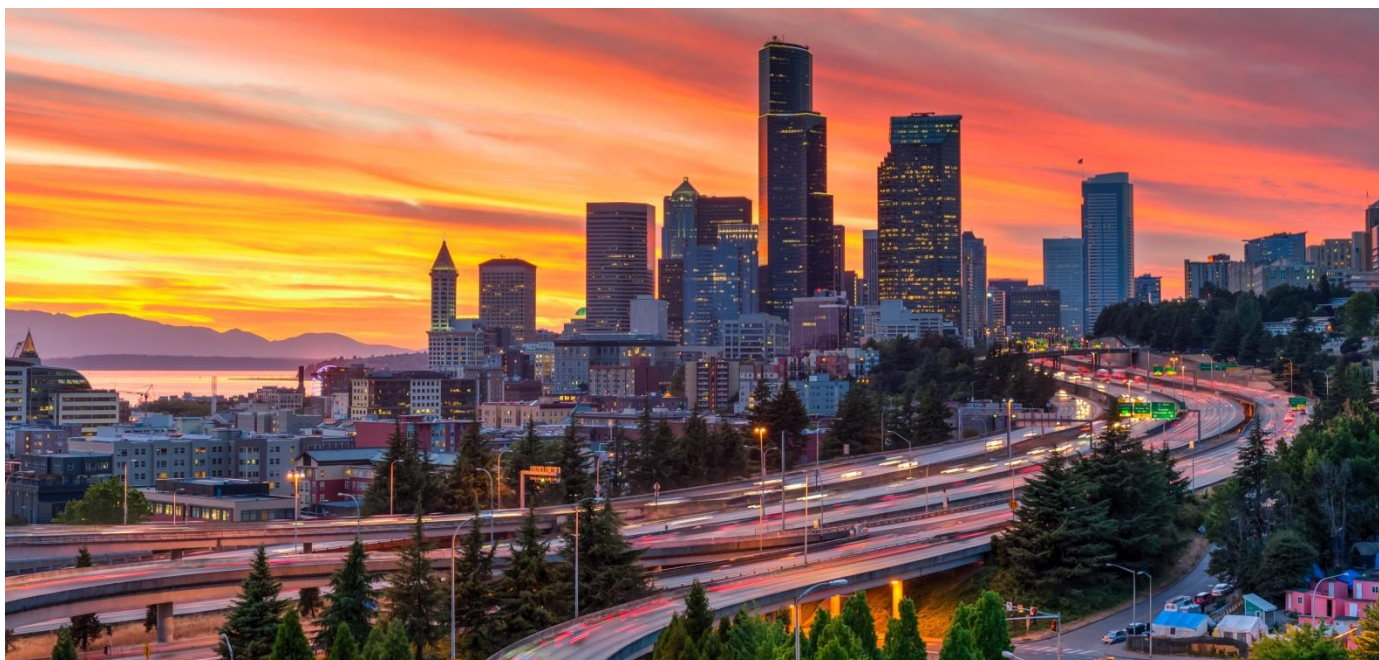


Benchmarking of the SQA Advanced Certificate and Diploma in the US Education System

SUMMARY REPORT



The SQA Advanced Diploma can be considered comparable to the first two years of a Bachelor degree and as such, holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma may be eligible for credit exemptions or direct entry to the third year of a degree at institutional discretion. Holders of the SQA Advanced Certificate may also be eligible for some credit exemptions from specialised first and second year courses within the US Bachelor degree.

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 US 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.
ICT and Communication, 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 progression for holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma to the second or third year of study at an SQA Progression Partner university.

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

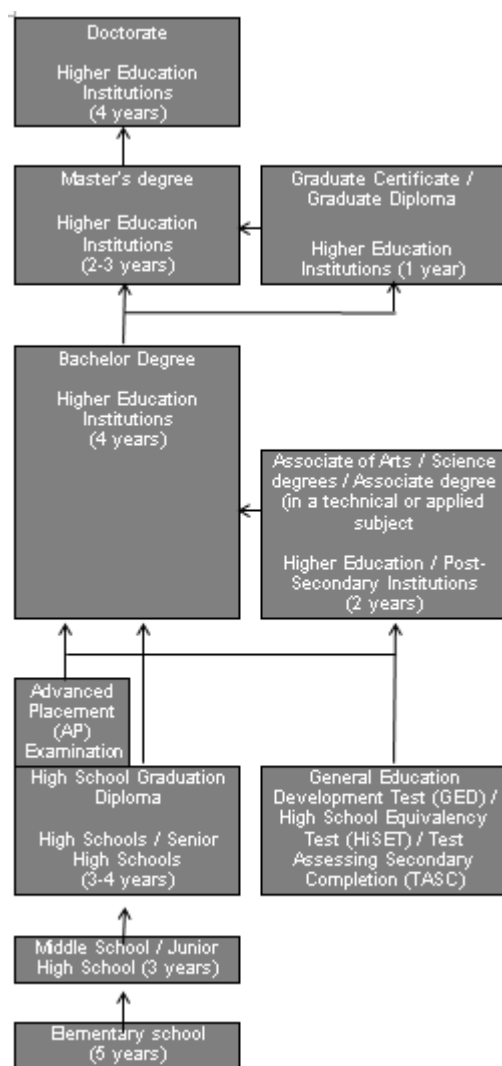
⁵ <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/79553.html>
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2. Comparative analysis with the US education system

Compulsory education in the USA covers ages 5 or 6 to 16, and the system is generally referred to as K-12 education. Although there are some regional variations, in most cases the school system is divided into three main phases: elementary school, covering kindergarten to 5th grade; middle school covering 6th grade to 8th grade; and high school covering 9th grade to 12th grade. Education may be state or privately funded. State funded education is free, and is more heavily regulated than the private sector. Curricula and standards are set at state board level, and there are no national examinations or national qualification frameworks.

The Department of Education is responsible for general education policy and some aspects of data collection and finance, but largely responsibility for education falls at state and local level. All states have a State Board of Education and there are additionally school boards that are responsible for overseeing primary and secondary schools within their district. Technical and Vocational Education, or CTE (Career and Technical Education), is overseen by the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education (OCTAE) of the Department of Education, with a primary focus on national initiatives and programmes although provision and policy is coordinated at state level.

The overall structure of the US system can be seen in the chart below:



As shown in the chart, the US Associate degree is the most similar in terms of entry and progression to the SQA Advanced qualifications; although with no directly comparable exit awards within the US qualifications system that would align with the SQA Advanced Diploma, it is useful to also consider the potential for articulation into undergraduate degree programmes.

Postsecondary vocational education is offered by private and public institutions. Institutions such as technical and community colleges offer a range of qualifications, including Certificate and Diploma programmes, usually ranging from one to two years in duration. Associate degrees are typically offered at technical and community colleges, and often have open enrolment in order to appeal to a wide range of applicants, including school leavers or those returning to study. A range of subjects are offered, encompassing both arts and science subjects. Differing titles may be awarded, including Associate of Applied Business, Associate of Applied Technology, Associate of Occupational Studies, although Associate of Applied Science is the most common.

Progression to tertiary academic or vocational studies in the USA usually requires the High School Diploma though as admission is determined on an individual basis, some institutions set additional requirements for entry to a Bachelor degree programme based on results obtained in standardised tests and examinations, which may include:

- American College Testing Programme (ACT);
- SAT (originally the Scholastic Aptitude Test); or
- Advanced Placement (AP) examinations, though high scores may grant advanced standing or credit exemptions for a Bachelor degree.

The SQA Advanced qualifications have a fixed duration with 960 hours over one year for the SQA Advanced Certificate and 2400 hours over two years for the SQA Advanced Diploma. Associate degree programmes are usually two years in duration and comprise 60-120 credits although some institutions offer an accelerated programme of one year's duration. Bachelor degree programmes are usually four years in duration and require a minimum of 120 credits. Some specialisms may require a longer duration and comprise more credits.

The SQA Advanced qualifications, the Associate degree and the Bachelor degree programmes encompass a variety of modes of learning and study, including through lectures, laboratory and practical work, which is similar to the mode of delivery used in the SQA Advanced qualifications, though the structure and content is typically broader in the US programmes. The Associate degrees programmes include either a theoretical approach to the subject specialism or a focus on technical skills, and also include a range of wider courses from associated fields. For example, an Associate in Hospitality Administration and Management reviewed had 33 mandatory credits in the main subject area, six credits for electives to specialise (such as events management, customer service, or commercial food production) and 22-27 credits of general education requirements (ranging from sciences, to humanities and art) – this means that almost half of the credits in the Associate degree come from non-specialist, general education subjects. By contrast, those studying an SQA Advanced Certificate in Hospitality would have 64 credit points (two thirds of the course) for mandatory units on hospitality. A further 32 credit points are focussed on a specialisation which may relate to a particular aspect of hospitality, or include a language or IT focus which could have direct application to the hospitality context. Bachelor degree programmes similarly have a breadth of study in the first two years, with an increasing specialism in the final two years.

Assessment methods can vary in both the US and SQA Advanced qualifications, but usually include an assessment of theoretical knowledge and skills via a combination of examination and project work. In the US, grading systems vary from institution to institution, although a Grade Point Average (GPA) is usually used. Information on the grading system can typically be found on academic transcripts.

Learning outcomes for both the Associate degree and Bachelor degree vary by institution and subject and there is no nationally defined statement of outcomes or qualifications framework but review of a range of individual SQA and Associate degree programmes in selected subjects found that despite the broader context of the Associate degree, there are clear similarities in the overall educational goals of the SQA Advanced qualifications and the Associate degrees.

Outcomes for the Associate degrees vary depending on type: the Associate in Arts (AA) and the Associate in Science (AS) are generally seen as transfer degrees equivalent to two years of a US Bachelor degree and, in some institutions, reciprocal articulation agreements exist between institutions offering the course and universities, known as a 2+2 programme whereby candidates are able to transfer into a four year Bachelor's degree programme at third year. Other Associate degree titles such as Associate of Applied Science and Associate of Applied Arts more typically lead to direct progression into the workforce, potentially at a mid-level due to the technical or vocational knowledge accrued. This can be paralleled with the SQA Advanced qualifications outcomes, which serve to prepare students for further study or employment; for example with the SQA Advanced Certificate in Business, one of the specific aims is for candidates to 'enter a range of administrative, commercial or managerial positions in organisations.' The SQA Advanced Diploma, on the other hand, aims to 'provide an advanced entry point to an organisation' and 'facilitate speed of progression within an organisation', as well as promoting an 'advanced level of entry to further academic or professional qualification.'

3. Key findings of UK NARIC's Independent Review

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 US education system, the SQA Advanced qualifications most closely compare to the Associate degree in terms of entry and overall aims though there are differences in terms of duration, structure and progression routes and as such it is also useful to consider the comparability of the SQA Advanced qualifications in relation to Bachelor degree programmes based on similarities in entry requirements and articulation arrangements.

The SQA Advanced Diploma can be considered comparable to the first two years of a Bachelor degree, whilst noting it may be more specialised on an area of study: holders of the SQA Advanced Diploma may be eligible for credit exemptions or direct entry to the third year of a degree at institutional discretion. Holders of the SQA Advanced Certificate may also be eligible for some credit exemptions from specialised first and second year courses within the US Bachelor degree.

4. Methodology and sources

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 and vocational qualifications in the US 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 US education system and comparable qualifications was obtained from UK NARIC's *International Comparisons* database and official websites of US education authorities and institutions. The level descriptors of the qualification frameworks and similarly focussed qualifications in the USA were used as reference points in this study.