

Credit Transfer for Open/Online Graduate Programs: Annex 3 United Kingdom

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Table of Contents

3.3	United Kingdom	2
	UK universities	2
	Complicating factors – home nations and fee levels.....	3
	A note on CATS credits.....	3
	Master’s programmes.....	5
	Seeking for examples	6
3.3.1	Open University UK	6
	Graduate programmes.....	7
	MBA.....	7
	MSc in Advanced Networking.....	8
	MA in Art History – contrasts.....	9
3.3.2	University of Derby.....	9
	University of Derby Online.....	9
	Environmental Management MSc	9
	Credit transfer	10
	MBA Global Finance.....	11
	Strategic Management MSc.....	12
3.3.3	Anglia Ruskin University	12
	Online learning.....	12
	Project Management – MSc	13
	Global Military Veteran and Family Studies – MSc.....	13
	Women’s and Children’s Health – MSc	13
	Entry requirements and credit transfer	14
3.3.4	Credit transfer from higher vocational programmes.....	14
	Sub-degrees	14
	Higher vocational qualifications	16
	ATHE – a case study	17

3.3 United Kingdom

UK universities

The university sector in the UK has a complex structure, with at least four components:

- Established public universities and specialist public institutions of university rank, virtually all of whom are members of *UUK* (Universities UK).¹ UUK report that “in 2014–15 there were 164 higher education providers (excluding further education colleges) in the UK in receipt of public funding via one of the UK funding councils. 135 of these are Universities UK members.”
- A very small number of small public HE providers not yet upgraded to universities, but this was a category that was large until recently and may possibly grow again. Many of these are members of *GuildHE*.²
- Thirdly, there are a large number of public Further Education colleges teaching some HE. There are in total 371 FE colleges in the UK,³ a number that has shrunk in recent years due to mergers. The *Mixed Economy Group*⁴ is a collection of 41 large colleges which offer Higher Education in an FE setting.
- The *alternative providers* (private providers, both foundations and a few commercial companies). A few are quite large and well-known like Regents University⁵ (now a member of UUK) and BPP University⁶– and others, like the Interactive Design Institute⁷ and Open College of the Arts,⁸ are well known for innovative delivery – but the vast majority are small and unknown, yet numbering in the hundreds. These are sometimes called “challenger providers” and the innovative ones sometimes called “game changers”. This sector is said to be popular with the current Conservative government,⁹ yet actually started under the Labour government in the previous decade.

Key facts on alternative providers are:¹⁰

- 115 alternative providers have specific-course designation.
- A third of APs have fewer than 100 students, and only 11 have more than 1,000.
- 60 per cent of students at APs are studying for first degrees.
- 33 per cent of students at APs are from ethnic minorities.

¹ <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk>

² <https://www.guildhe.ac.uk/members/>

³ <https://www.aoc.co.uk/about-colleges/research-and-stats/key-further-education-statistics>

⁴ <http://www.mixedeconomygroup.co.uk>

⁵ <http://www.regents.ac.uk>

⁶ <http://www.bpp.com>

⁷ <http://idesigni.co.uk>

⁸ <https://www.oca.ac.uk>

⁹ Elections on 8 June

¹⁰ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/HEinEngland/providers/aps/>

It might be thought that restricting the issue to graduate programmes would simplify this picture. It does, but only to an extent. Virtually every institution with “university” in its title offers graduate programmes, and many others also, under “validation arrangements” where a more established provider assures the quality of the provision of the smaller, newer provider.

For example the non-profit foundation The **Open College of the Arts** (OCA) offers 12 bachelors and one master’s degree, but all are validated (accredited) by the University of the Creative Arts.¹¹ Interestingly OCA also have a PLAR policy which is highly visible and clearly explained,¹² much more so than many UK institutions.

Complicating factors – home nations and fee levels

The UK is not a federation like Canada (or the US or Australia) but is divided for governance purposes into four “home nations”: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. England is governed directly by the UK government – the other three home nations have varying degrees of devolution, but in education the devolution is absolute. The most visible symbol of this is that in Scotland the undergraduate degree programme takes four years; whereas in the other home nations it takes only three (short by international standards).

The second most visible symbol is that in Scotland there are no fees for students (on undergraduate full-time courses) whereas in England the fees (for undergraduate full-time courses) are around £9000 per year (\$16000 Canadian).¹³ (Other home nations have unstable compromise positions. England’s is now getting unstable too.)¹⁴

However, for graduate programmes the fee regime is more uniform. Universities can charge what the market can bear, and typically charge even higher fees for “international” students than for UK/EU students,¹⁵ whether for campus-based or distance programmes.

The high level of fees and increasing lack of government regulation of fee levels or quotas at universities (especially in England) leads to a highly competitive regime especially for graduate programmes.

As the devolution pressures build there are fewer and fewer “national” (i.e. UK-wide) institutions in the education and culture sphere in the UK. In fact the BBC and the Open University are two of the remaining ones. A few other universities operate cross-border for distance learning and a very few have campuses in more than one home nation (usually a Scottish or Welsh university with a campus in London).

A note on CATS credits

Study time at universities in the UK is measured under a scheme called *CATS* (Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme). In typical British fashion there is a lack of clear

¹¹ <https://www.oca.ac.uk/creative-arts-degrees/>

¹² <https://www.oca.ac.uk/studying-with-the-oca/gaining-exemptions/>

¹³ Exchange rate on 11 May 2017

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/aug/29/uk-universities-chief-pushes-back-against-critics-system>

¹⁵ The EU fee area includes a somewhat wider range of countries than just EU Member States – for the tedious details see <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Fees-and-Money/England-fee-status>

definition of this scheme at a detailed level, thus we are forced to rely on the Wikipedia article to give the flavour – we have italicised and/or footnoted some typical British words to demonstrate the tentative aspects of the scheme:¹⁶

Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) is used by *many* universities in the United Kingdom to monitor, record and reward passage through a modular degree course and to *facilitate* movement between courses and institutions. One credit is equivalent to 10 *notional* hours of study (contact time and allocation for self-study). For example, a university course of 150 estimated study hours would be worth 15 credits, and a university course of 300 estimated study hours would be worth 30 credits. A full academic year is worth 120 credits and a full calendar year (normally only at postgraduate level) 180 credits....

Credits are associated with a level at which the learning took place. At universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, this will be one of Levels 4 to 8 on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ),¹⁷ representing the first, second and third year of a bachelor's degree (levels 4 – 6),¹⁸ master's level (level 7)¹⁹ and doctoral level (level 8).²⁰

In Scotland this will be at one of level 7 to 12 on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), representing the first, second, third and fourth year of a bachelor's degree (levels 7 – 10), master's level (level 11) and doctoral level (level 12).²¹

Typically, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland,

- a bachelor's degree with honours requires 360 credits, with at least 90 at level 6 of the FHEQ;
- an ordinary bachelor's degree requires 300 credits with 60 at level 6;
- a foundation degree requires 240 credits with 90 at level 5;
- an integrated master's degree requires 480 credits with 120 at level 7;
- a postgraduate taught master's degree requires 180 credits with 150 at level 7
- and a professional doctorate requires 540 credits with 360 at level 8.

Degrees in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science are not normally credit rated, nor are PhDs or master's degrees by research...."Fast track" two-year bachelor's degrees at the University of Buckingham make use of the full calendar year to fit a 360 credit course into two years.

The international comparisons are interesting if suspect:

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Credit_Accumulation_and_Transfer_Scheme

¹⁷ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/qualifications-frameworks.pdf>

¹⁸ Level 6 is as in ISCED, level 5 is vaguely aligned with ISCED 5, and level 4 is not

¹⁹ As in ISCED

²⁰ As in ISCED

²¹ Completely misaligned with ISCED. This lack of alignment is typical of the British approach to international norms, though the Scots normally take more care than the English

UK Credits are the same at a nominal 10 hours of learning per credit unit across CATS, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (covering higher and further education, vocational education and school qualifications in Scotland), the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (ditto for Wales) and the Regulated Qualifications Framework (further education and vocational education in England and Northern Ireland and school qualifications in England).

There is an **official equivalence** with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) of two UK Credits equals one ECTS Credit, based on there being 120 UK Credits to an academic year and ECTS Credits being defined as there being 60 to an academic year.

Four CATS points are *equivalent* to one US credit hour.²² Rather than award fractional credits, US universities will sometimes consider a typical British 10 credit module to be worth 3 (rather than 2.5) US credit hours, similarly rounding 15 UK Credit modules to 4 US credit hours and 20 UK Credit modules to 5 US credit hours.

Master's programmes

The innate conservatism of universities has led to a surprising similarity in the structure of master's programmes right across the UK despite 25 years of devolved administration of education.²³

Master's degrees may be either "research" or "taught", with taught degrees being further subdivided into "specialist or advanced study" or "professional or practice".

Taught degrees (of both forms) typically take a full calendar year (i.e. three semesters, 12 months), although some may be completed within an academic year (i.e. two semesters, 8 months), while research degrees often take either a full calendar year (rather tight) or two academic years. Typically a taught master's has 180 CATS points (90 ECTS) and a research master's 240 CATS points (120 ECTS). This is rather short by EU standards, though not the shortest.²⁴ The correlation to the US credit hours at the "official" 4:1 exchange rate – which works out at 45 credit hours for 180 CATS and 60 credit hours for 240 CATS – is implausibly high to many people who have worked or studied in both systems, but there is a lack of expert information on the comparisons.²⁵

The UK integrated master's degree is combined with a bachelor's degree for a four (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) or five (Scotland) academic year total period – one academic year longer than a normal bachelor's degree.

A relatively standard structure for a taught master's programme (180 CATS) is as follows:

- Postgraduate Certificate (PgC) – 60 CATS
- Postgraduate Diploma (PgD) – 60 CATS
- Dissertation or individual project – 60 CATS

²² Much debate about this

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Further_and_Higher_Education_Act_1992

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Master%27s_degree#Comparable_European_degrees

²⁵ But see for example <http://www.studyacrossthepond.com/uk-vs-us-degrees>

In some cases the final element shrinks but it is rare in the UK for the individual project element to be replaced completely by coursework.

This three-tier aspect seems to be part of the mechanism which facilitates transfer between institutions, often at the pre-dissertation level, as we shall see.

Seeking for examples

As general guidance, when researchers look for the most innovative practice in pedagogy and accreditation in the UK it has been standard practice to look more at newer entrants to the HE sector. As a well-known example it was the former polytechnics (so-called “new universities”, “modern universities” or post-92s)²⁶ who were the early developers of business schools with MBA programmes, in some cases years ahead of traditional institutions.²⁷ Similarly in more recent years it has been the post-92 institutions which have been most active in both work-based learning and distance learning (until quite recently, when MOOCs started to appear in elite institutions).

Many would argue that the UK Open University (founded 1969, not long after many other institutions such as Warwick and East Anglia) long ago joined the conservative ranks. Thus we shall spend some time looking at the OU but also at some post-92 institutions active in online learning and some new private providers.

3.3.1 Open University UK

The Open University needs little introduction. We shall just give the highlights.

The OU is a public distance learning and research university. The majority of the OU’s students are based throughout the UK and study off-campus; many of its courses can also be studied anywhere in the world. (There are a small number of full-time postgraduate research students based, at least in theory, on the campus.)

The OU has 1000 members of academic and research staff and over 2500 administrative, operational and support staff.

It was established in 1969, right at the end of an active decade of UK university formation – in fact there was almost no further university formation activity for 13 years.²⁸ The OU awards undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, as well as non-degree qualifications such as diplomas and certificates or continuing education units.

With more than 250,000 students enrolled, the OU is the largest academic institution in the United Kingdom (and one of the largest in Europe) by student number, and qualifies as one of the world’s largest universities. It is a member of EADTU.

The Open University is also one of only three United Kingdom higher education institutions to gain accreditation in the United States of America, by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (accredited in 2005; reaccredited in 2015).²⁹ This gives it a nearly unique

²⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_universities_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_universities_(United_Kingdom))

²⁷ See for example https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Judge_Business_School

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_UK_universities_by_date_of_foundation#1960s_universities

²⁹ https://www.msche.org/institutions_view.asp?idinstitution=560

UK perspective on the US HE system, though it has to be said it has done little to develop this foothold after one disastrous adventure.³⁰

The OU Business School is also triply-accredited,³¹ by AACSB, EQUIS/CEL and AMBA; we shall specifically examine MBA programmes.

Graduate programmes

The OU offers 34 Master's, 20 PgDs and 29 PgCs.³²

MBA

The MBA from OU has a slightly different approach from other of its Master's and from many other MBAs. It has a standard PgC stage 1 (60 CATS) but the PgD-type Stage 2 is 120 credits and includes Stage 3 – 90 CATS of courses followed by a “half-size” (30 CATS) individual project.³³ This does not facilitate transfers in or out.

Credit transfer

In general terms the OU does award transfer credit at graduate level, from programmes no more than 16 years old (a much longer time window than usual), and in quanta of 30 credits (half a PgC).

Each programme that a student might want to transfer credit into has its own Credit Transfer Factsheet. For the MBA this goes into great detail:³⁴

- No credit transfer available into Stage 1 (PgC) – this is unusual
- No credit transfer into the individual project (“capstone”) – this is usual
- Credit transfer in chunks of 5 CATS into the optional modules of Stage 2, either module exemption or general credit exemption

This last aspect has some complicated rules:³⁵

Module exemption: means that you have been exempted from a particular OU module in recognition of your previous study. Your prior study must be at, or equivalent to, the UK academic level of the OU module/s you are being exempted from, and considered to be broadly in-line with the learning outcomes of your chosen OU qualification. Your Credit Transfer Award will specify which OU module/s you have been exempted from studying towards your chosen OU qualification.

³⁰ One perspective on this can be read at <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2006/1/the-closing-of-the-us-open-university> – there are other views, summarised in http://bacsich.typepad.com/elearning/2006/05/secret_historie_1-1.html

³¹ <http://www7.open.ac.uk/coll/accreditation.asp>

³² <http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/types>

³³ “Making a difference: the management initiative” – <http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/modules/b839>

³⁴ <http://www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/sites/www.open.ac.uk.study.credit-transfer/files/files/ecms/credit-transfer-ps/my-ou-qualification/m/MBA%20%28F61%29.pdf>

³⁵ See previous footnote

General credit exemption: means that you have been exempted from studying the specified amount of credit at the given academic level towards this OU qualification. This type of credit transfer is awarded if your previous study is at, or equivalent to, the UK academic level of the OU module/s concerned and is considered relevant to this OU qualification in terms of subject and/or skills development. This type of credit transfer differs from module exemption in that it does not exempt you from any particular OU module/s. Your Credit Transfer Award will indicate the number of credits you have been exempted from, and at what level/s, towards specific components of the qualification.

There are time limits on the counting of credit towards this qualification: The credit required from OU modules or any permitted credit transfer towards this qualification must be obtained during a period not exceeding 7 years. This period commences from the completion date of the study for which credit transfer is given, or your first OU module (whichever is the earliest). If you have more than one period of previous study for which you are awarded credit transfer, we will use the date of the earliest.

The University now awards credit transfer for study completed in the last 16 years
How much credit you are awarded is likely to depend in part on how closely the subjects of your previous studies match those of the modules in this qualification

Thus the credit transfer is not formulaic: evidence is needed and academic judgements need to be made. It has to be said it is rather typical of the OU to have complicated rules.

MSc in Advanced Networking

This³⁶ is a 180 CATs Master's programme typical of those offered by many UK universities with competence in Computer Science and so might be expected to follow the standard rubric. However there are some OU wrinkles.

Stage 1 of the programme is a "direct to PgD" 120 CATS.

Stage 2 has the option of either a "research" or "professional" route. The research route is the standard 60 CATS master's dissertation (10,000–15,000 words); the professional route has a half-size 30 CATS individual project preceded by a compulsory 30 CATS course.

There appear to be no specific credit transfer rules for this programme but there are for the closely associated programme MSc in Networks and Distributed Systems.³⁷

MSc in Networks and Distributed Systems – credit transfer

This programme has the sector-standard 120-CATS PgD followed by a 60-CATS dissertation.

Up to 30 CATS of module exemption or general credit exemption is available.

There is no credit transfer into the dissertation – this is usual.

³⁶ <http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/qualifications/f56>

³⁷ <http://www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/sites/www.open.ac.uk.study.credit-transfer/files/files/ecms/credit-transfer-ps/my-ou-qualification/n/Networks%20Distributed%20Systems%20MSc%20%28F42%29.pdf>

As usual for the OU, credit is awarded in units of 5 CATS.

MA in Art History – contrasts

As a subject and qualification contrast, we look at the MA in Art History.³⁸ This has a Part 1 (PgC style) of 60 CATS, but then followed by a monolithic Part 2 of 120 CATS: that has four blocks and followed by a dissertation (CATS value not given, but likely to be 30 or under). Interestingly this qualification allows up to 60 CATS of transferred credit, but only *into* Part 1. The whole of Part 2 (not only the dissertation) is ineligible for credit transfer.³⁹

3.3.2 University of Derby

The University of Derby⁴⁰ is a public university based in the north of the city of Derby. It gained university status in 1992 as one of the new universities, but unusually for that year it was not upgraded from a polytechnic but directly from a college of education – this has occasionally raised issues of “status”.

The university provides over 300 study programmes at undergraduate level, as well as short courses, foundation degrees and postgraduate degrees covering most academic disciplines.

University of Derby Online

This offers 76 online courses of which 20 are full Master’s programmes, listed below:⁴¹

Advanced Materials and Additive Manufacturing MSc	Education MA
Education MA (English for Speakers of Other Languages)	Education MA (Leadership and Management)
Environmental Health MSc	Environmental Management MSc
Ergonomics MSc	Finance MSc
Health Psychology MSc	Information Technology MSc
Integrative Health and Social Care MSc	International Hospitality Management MSc
Master of Public Health	MBA Global
MBA Global Finance	Occupational Health, Safety and Environmental Management MSc
Professional Engineering MSc	Psychology MSc
Public and Environmental Health MSc	Strategic Management MSc

Environmental Management MSc

The Environmental Management MSc is a sector-standard MSc split into the usual stages:⁴²

- Postgraduate Certificate (PG Cert) – 60 CATS
- Postgraduate Diploma (PG Dip) – 60 CATS

³⁸ <http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/qualifications/f33>

³⁹ See regulations MA-AH 4.3 and MA-AH 4.4 of <http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/contentlibrary/qualifications/postgraduate/currentframework/f33/reg-f33>

⁴⁰ <https://www.derby.ac.uk>

⁴¹ <https://www.derby.ac.uk/online/choose-your-online-course>

⁴² <https://www.derby.ac.uk/online/course/environmental-management-msc>

- Full MSc: Independent Scholarly Activity – 60 CATS.

It is accredited by the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) as well as by the university.

Entrants will normally need an undergraduate degree (minimum 2:2 in UK terminology – US GPA 2.5–3.0 approximately).⁴³ A science or related degree is preferred but a range of degrees will be considered.

*Students without such a degree but having extensive and relevant work experience at an appropriate level are also likely to be considered.*⁴⁴

Independent Scholarly Activity

This is typical of the way many UK universities “scaffold” the dissertation aspect at 60 CATS to ensure it is less daunting, while at the same time retaining the brand value of a 60-CATS dissertation rather than splitting research methods out (e.g. into a 30-CATS module) and explicitly accepting a “lesser status” half-size 30-CATS individual project:⁴⁵

This module represents an opportunity for you to apply the knowledge and understanding you have gained from the taught modules within their Programme of study to a specific research based investigation. You will have the opportunity to apply initiative, creative thinking and organisational skills to a specific topic within your MSc programme of study. Early on in the module, emphasis will be placed on the research skills necessary to execute an independent, investigative study. You will be expected to devise a research proposal and then execute the study over a given time frame.

On successful completion of this module, you will be able to demonstrate initiative and critical thinking skills in selecting a problem for investigation and identifying appropriate methodologies for their implementation, Critically evaluate existing literature in the field of enquiry; and collect, interpret and critically evaluate primary/secondary data and discuss its significance in the context of the investigation and of related studies.

Credit transfer

The University of Derby is a leader in the UK approach to PLAR – in the UK called APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning). The relevant page⁴⁶ is linked from the main *Choose your online course* page. Extracts from that are below:

Have you already studied at another institution, completed a training course or does your work experience appear equivalent to one or more modules on your chosen course? If so, you may be able to translate this prior learning into credits towards

⁴³ <https://www.ten-percent.co.uk/conversion-table-for-us-gpa-to-uk-class-degrees/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.derby.ac.uk/online/course/environmental-management-msc/entry-requirements>

⁴⁵ Click on the *Independent Scholarly Activity* link on <https://www.derby.ac.uk/online/course/environmental-management-msc/modules> to see this text

⁴⁶ <https://www.derby.ac.uk/online/course-credits-past-study-and-experience>

your course modules so that you don't have to study them again. This is called Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL. There are two types of RPL:

- Recognition of Prior Certificated Learning or RPCL: Recognises learning for which you have been formally assessed and awarded a certificate.
- Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning or RPEL: Recognises your knowledge and skills developed experience, including your work and voluntary activities.

For postgraduate courses you can apply for up to 60 credits [typically 1/3] of the total requirement for your course. We will need appropriate evidence that your prior learning matches the course content/module you wish to be exempt from.

RPCL is a process whereby academic credit for learning that has been previously assessed and/or accredited at Higher Education (HE) level, through a formal course of study could be used towards the credit requirements of a UDOL award. Evidence to support a claim will involve the *submission of a formal qualification or award or part of an award, with formal documentation* such as a results transcript or formal certificate and/or evidence of assessment, as appropriate, from a University, College or Professional and/or Regulatory Body.

For **RPEL**, assessment of a claim is based on *documented evidence of the learning achieved*. For such claims you are eligible for academic support in evidencing your knowledge and skills. The University is responsible for assessing if the learning is valid and matches the level of learning required, if the learning is current and if sufficient evidence has been provided to demonstrate the learning.

MBA Global Finance

The MBA Global Finance is another sector-standard MBA with the usual three 60-CATS phases. It is accredited by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI): thus MBA graduates also gain the CMI Level 7 Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership.

Because this academic qualification is so closely linked to vocational qualifications there are specific additional credit transfer routes from the vocational qualifications hierarchy, as listed below.⁴⁷

Qualification	Maximum credits awarded	Additional credits required for MBA Global Finance
ABE Level 7 Diploma in Business (QCF)	Up-to 60 credits	Up-to 120 credits
ACCA (with chartered certified accountant status)	Up-to 60 credits	Up-to 120 credits
CIMA (CIMA member)	Up-to 40 credits	Up-to 140 credits
CIPFA	Up-to 60 credits	Up-to 120 credits
CMI Level 7 Qualifications in Strategic Management and Leadership (QCF)	Up-to 60 credits	Up-to 120 credits
Edexcel BTEC Level 7 Diploma in Strategic Management & Leadership (QCF)	Up-to 60 credits	Up-to 120 credits

⁴⁷ <https://www.derby.ac.uk/online/course/online-mba-global-finance-master-business-administration-degree-course/exemptions>

In crude terms, such routes normally allow students to avoid the PgC-level courses in the programme.

Strategic Management MSc

Again this is sector-standard:⁴⁸

It offers a tailored progression route through three levels which culminates in the Masters award. You qualify for a PG Certificate [60 CATS] after completing 3 modules, a PG Diploma [next 60 CATS] after 6 modules and for the full Masters you'll need to complete the Certificate and Diploma level plus an Independent Study (triple module). So if you really can't complete the full programme, you can still gain an award and recognition for your work.

Unlike the MBA Global Finance there is no professional accreditation and no credit transfer route from the vocational hierarchy. However there are the usual University of Derby APL routes for up to 60 CATS.

3.3.3 Anglia Ruskin University

Anglia Ruskin University⁴⁹ is a public university in East Anglia, United Kingdom. It has 39,400 students worldwide and has campuses in Cambridge, Chelmsford and Peterborough. It also shares campuses with the College of West Anglia in King's Lynn, Wisbech and Cambridge. It became a university in 1992 (like Derby and around 20 others) and was renamed Anglia Ruskin University (after John Ruskin) in 2005.

Online learning

Anglia Ruskin has been active in distance learning for many years, both directly and in partnership with RDI (later Arden University, until recently part of Capella, but sold to Global University Systems in 2016).⁵⁰ It offers 49 programmes at a range of levels, including 20 Master's programmes listed in the table below.⁵¹

Master of Business Administration – MBA	Project Management – MSc
Data Centre Leadership and Management – MA	Healthcare Management – MSc
Global Military Veteran and Family Studies – MSc	Applied Linguistics and TESOL – MA
Advanced Midwifery Practice – MSc	Magnetic Resonance Imaging – MSc
Biomedical Science – MSc	Plastic and Aesthetic Surgery Practice – Master of Surgery – MCh
Adult Critical Care Nursing – MSc	Educational Leadership and Management – MBA
Medical and Healthcare Education – MSc	Women's and Children's Health – MSc
Healthcare Management (for Royal Navy) – MSc	Healthcare Management for Army Medical Services (AMS) Warrant Officers – MSc

⁴⁸ <https://www.derby.ac.uk/online/course/strategic-management-msc>

⁴⁹ <http://www.anglia.ac.uk>

⁵⁰ <http://www.globaluniversitysystems.com/news/global-university-systems-announces-acquisition-of-arden-university>

⁵¹ <https://distancelearning.anglia.ac.uk/courseList.php>

Healthcare Management (for Army Officer ICSC (L)) – MSc	Healthcare Management (RAF) – MSc
Healthcare Management (for RAF Medical Support Officers) – MSc	(Royal Engineers) – MBA

The ones in bold are described in more detail below.

Project Management – MSc

This⁵² is rather minimally described with no CATS values and no internal structure other than a list of 8 apparently compulsory modules and a dissertation. It is said to be Association for Project Management (APM) accredited, but again without detail. No links from the programme site give details of credit transfer.

Global Military Veteran and Family Studies – MSc

This programme again has a minimal description.⁵³ However, an intriguing feature is:

Collaborative delivery on select modules with Uniformed Services University, National Defense University, United States and Indian Institute of Technology, India along with visiting research opportunities for students at these facilities.

Entrants need to have a good first degree from a UK university at a minimum of 2:2 or equivalent. For entrants without a first degree the University will also consider work-based experience or a portfolio equivalent to a degree in breadth and depth, considered on a case by case basis.

Women’s and Children’s Health – MSc

As with some other programmes from this provider, the description of this programme is very vague in respect of CATS values and study sequence.⁵⁴

The study requirements are listed as three core modules followed by a “Postgraduate Major Project”, plus an unknown number of three optional modules. An informed guess would be that one optional module is required, thus making four study modules of 30 CATS (forming a PgD) and then a 60-CATS dissertation (“major” suggests 60 rather than 30).

Entry requirements are a bit more flexible for this programme:

Entrants should have a UK Honours Degree (or equivalent). In addition applicants who hold an academic or professional qualification approved by senate (or a committee acting on its behalf) as equivalent in breadth and depth to a UK Honours Degree will also be considered. Moreover non-graduates with extensive relevant practical and continuing professional development experience will be considered on an individual basis.

Not surprisingly, applicants are also expected to have recent experience (within the last two years) of working in a field related to women’s or children’s health.

⁵² <https://distancelearning.anglia.ac.uk/courseDetail.php/MSc-Project-Management-113/>

⁵³ <https://distancelearning.anglia.ac.uk/courseDetail.php/MSc-Global-Military-Veteran-and-Family-Studies-98/>

⁵⁴ <http://www.anglia.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/womens-and-childrens-health>

Entry requirements and credit transfer

As is typical in the post-92 subsector, Anglia Ruskin's approach to PLAR is similar to that of Derby – but not identical.⁵⁵

Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL)

Highlights are:

- Credit transfer of up to 2/3 of CATS value (thus in theory 120 CATS on a Masters)
- The marks or grades obtained from accredited prior learning do not contribute to the determination of the classification of your Anglia Ruskin award.
- Check on compatibility and relevance of syllabus
- Previous programmes completed within the last five years; or if not, submission of a portfolio with CV, list of completed CPD, employer reference and reflective statement of 750–1000 words

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

This section is very brief. Highlights are:

- Credit transfer of up to 1/2 of CATS value (thus in theory 90 CATS on a Masters)

3.3.4 Credit transfer from higher vocational programmes

Consideration of traditional providers of campus and distance learning in the UK (including the once-radical OU and the mostly still-radical post-92 institutions) does not reveal the richness of current credit transfer and PLAR mechanisms in the UK, especially (but not only) from the vocational sector. In order to fully understand this, some further background is needed on “sub-degree” qualifications in the UK.

Sub-degrees

The following discussion is largely oriented to England, and to some extent to Wales and Northern Ireland. These are the three home nations where the UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications⁵⁶ holds sway. (Scotland has a similar but separate system called the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework⁵⁷ – and it could be argued that this is more compatible with the Canadian 4-year degree system; however the phenomena we are investigating are much more prevalent in England.)

In summary, although the standard endpoint of an undergraduate (first cycle) programme in England is the degree (honours degree in all but a few cases) granted after three years full-time study (or its part-time equivalent) there are a number of traditional sub-degree qualifications and one more recent one. The following descriptions are taken from the standard UK university admissions site UCAS:⁵⁸

⁵⁵ <http://www.anglia.ac.uk/study/more-information-for-applicants/accreditation-of-prior-learning>

⁵⁶ For the purest version see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Framework-Higher-Education-Qualifications-08.pdf>

⁵⁷ <http://scqf.org.uk>

⁵⁸ <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/international-and-eu-students/ucas-terms-explained>

- Higher National Certificate (HNC) is a vocationally-focused higher education qualification offered in the UK, usually taking one year to complete, and roughly equivalent to one year (the first year) of university study.
- Higher National Diploma (HND) is a vocationally-focused higher education qualification offered in the UK, roughly equivalent to the completion of the second year of a three-year degree course.

In typical British fashion, nothing can be that simple. In addition there are other sub-degree qualifications such as:

- CertHE – a Certificate of Higher Education is a higher education qualification offered in the UK, typically taking one year (full-time) or two years (part-time) study to complete; somewhat like a less vocational HNC. Indeed, CertHE and HNC are treated together on the UCAS site and some programmes offer both options as exit routes.
- DipHE – a Diploma in Higher Education is a higher education qualification offered in the UK and generally awarded after two years of full-time study at a university or higher education institution; somewhat like a less vocational HND

There is also the “Ordinary degree”. This is unhelpfully defined as a degree passed “without honours”. Some universities (mainly in Scotland) offer ordinary degree courses in their own right. Ordinary degrees can also be awarded at some universities to those students who do complete an honours degree course but without achieving the conditions required to gain “honours”.

More strategically, there is also the Foundation Degree. The UCAS site describes it as follows:⁵⁹

A foundation degree is a degree level qualification which combines academic study with work place learning. Designed in association with employers, they are qualifications to equip people with the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to achieve academic results as well as improve performance and productivity in the work place.

A full-time foundation degree will usually take about two years to complete, and part-time courses may take longer.

As a graduate from a foundation degree you will have many different options. You may decide to continue with your current studies for a further year (more if part-time) to achieve a full honours degree.

At the risk of horrifying the many enthusiasts of Foundation Degrees, for a non-UK audience one could describe them as a special kind of HND. Indeed in the UK, many students and some universities were reluctant for some years to switch from the tried-and-tested HND to the “new-fangled” Foundation Degree.

Nevertheless, today they have become a popular route and there are now 2457 Foundation Degree programmes, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – and also 5 in the Channel Islands – but none in Scotland.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ <http://fd.ucas.com/FoundationDegree/About.aspx>

⁶⁰ <http://fd.ucas.com/CourseSearch/>

Some 145 providers offer HNC or CertHE including some in Scotland.⁶¹ Some 268 providers offer HND or DipHE or Foundation Degrees though less than a handful in Scotland.

Last but by no means least we should stress that these sub-degree routes are extremely popular with overseas students coming to the UK.

Before moving on to vocational qualifications we must again stress that HNC and HND are *higher education qualifications*, in the FHEQ, monitored via QAA, applied for via UCAS and approved by HEFCE and the other university funding councils. They are also vocational. Some confusion seems to have crept in because many HNCs and HNDs have a syllabus devised by Pearson under the BTEC scheme.

For reassurance, here is the list of higher education qualifications that institutions have to report on for statistical purposes:⁶²

Recognised HE courses are those where, on successful completion, the student is *awarded by a relevant recognised body*, one of the following qualifications:

- a higher degree, such as a PhD, MPhil, MSc, MA, MBA
- a postgraduate diploma
- a postgraduate initial teacher training qualification, such as a Postgraduate or Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
- a first degree, such as a foundation degree, BSc, BA, or Bachelor of Education (BEd)
- a foundation degree bridging course, where these are integrated into the final years of a first degree
- a Higher National Diploma (HND)
- a Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE)
- a Higher National Certificate (HNC)
- a Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS) or a Level 5 120-credit point Diploma in Education and Training
- a Certificate in Education (CertEd).

Relevant recognised bodies are:

- any UK institution with the power to award degrees
- for foundation degrees (but not for foundation degree bridging courses), any further education college in England with the power to award such degrees
- for HNDs and HNCs, Pearson Education Ltd and the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Higher vocational qualifications

As above we focus mainly on England.

In England there is a separate qualifications framework for school-level and vocational (usually but not always post-compulsory school) qualifications. This is the Regulated

⁶¹ <http://search.ucas.com/search/providers?flt8=4&Vac=1&AvailableIn=2017>

⁶² https://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2014/201424/HEFCE2014_24g.DOC

Qualifications Framework (RQF).⁶³ In particular it includes the standard exams taken by almost every student at school (GCSE and similar, at RQF levels 1 and 2) but also the standard examinations needed for university entrance (A level, International Baccalaureate, etc).

But it is not always realised that RQF extends *all the way up the HE hierarchy* to form a fully parallel system of qualifications right up to doctoral. In theory all HE qualifications from the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ) are embedded within that (e.g. with degrees at RQF level 6), but in practice these are handled separately. With one exception: the HNC (RQF level 4) and HND (RQF level 5) are handled jointly.

Nowadays it is not just theory. Increasingly there are credible post-school qualifications at level 6 and 7, not just at levels 4 and 5, which raise key issues about credit transfer into Master's programmes. Indeed, we have already described the MBA Global Finance at the University of Derby which offers several such routes into its MBA.

The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) has a regulator, OFQUAL, which operates at two levels: it regulates qualifications from providers (of education to end-users) and validators (who in turn regulate providers). Rather than focus (as studies often do) on Pearson, we shall take one of the less-known but possibly more innovative validators.

ATHE – a case study

ATHE Ltd (strapline “Awards for Training and Higher Education”) is an OFQUAL-regulated validator (RN5344).⁶⁴ It offers qualifications in:⁶⁵

- Business & Management
- Health & Social Care
- Travel & Tourism Management
- Law
- Computing

and also accredits custom courses.

Its qualifications include level 7 (Master's-equivalent) and 6 (degree-equivalent) as well as levels 5 (HND-equivalent), 4 (HNC-equivalent) and 3 (university-entrance-equivalent).

Business and Strategic Management – Level 7

There are two sizes of qualification: a Diploma and an Extended Diploma. The Diploma is a 60 credit⁶⁶ qualification. The Extended Diploma is a 120 credit qualification.

Several of ATHE's providers offer these qualifications online.

⁶³ <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2015/10/01/explaining-the-rqf/> and <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels>

⁶⁴ <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Search?category=Organisations&query=ATHE>

⁶⁵ <https://athe.co.uk/athe-qualifications/>

⁶⁶ We use “credit” not “CATS” as these are not HE qualifications but they both equate to 10 hours learning per point

For learners who have recently been in education or training the entry profile is likely to include a first degree in Business, Management or related subjects or a relevant RQF level 6 qualification (for example an ATHE level 6 Diploma in Management). Mature learners may present a more varied profile of achievement that is likely to include extensive relevant work experience with levels of responsibility, participation and/or achievement of a range of relevant professional qualifications – admissions should make use of RPL and ATHE provides guidance on procedures.

Topping up/credit transfer

ATHE note that:⁶⁷

Topping-up to a bachelor degree following achievement of a Level 5 Extended Diploma will typically take twelve months of further study.

Topping up to an MBA from a Level 7 Diploma typically takes 6 to 9 months.

ATHE has an agreement with Western International College Online (WINC Online) to enable holders of the Level 7 Diploma in Strategic Management to top up to an MBA, taught online by WINC but offered by London Metropolitan University.⁶⁸ This is one of a number of arrangements listed below:

<i>University</i>	<i>Award</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Extra conditions</i>
University of Sunderland	MBA Top up	6-7 months	
University of Bolton	MBA Top up	7 months	
University of Gloucestershire	MBA Top up	4 months	
Northampton University	MBA Top Up (Distance Learning)	1 year	Learners must complete the following units: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Business Environment • Managing Organisational Improvement • International Marketing OR Strategic Marketing
Western International College (WINC) Online, Awarded by London Metropolitan University	MBA Top-up (60 Credits)	9 months	

London Metropolitan University MBA Top-Up

There is an excellent web page describing this option.⁶⁹

The MBA Top-Up is a distance learning course – teaching and project supervision take place online. The course is assessed through a 5,000-word research proposal (Research Methods

⁶⁷ <https://athe.co.uk/business-and-strategic-management-qualifications/>

⁶⁸ <https://athe.co.uk/progression-routes/>

⁶⁹ <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/mba-top-up---mba/>

module of 20 CATS) and a business consultancy project report of 8,000 to 10,000 words (40 CATS) which will need to be completed over approximately three months.

It is targeted at those who have already acquired a Level 7 Postgraduate Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership (or equivalent), e.g. from the Chartered Institute of Management (CMI)⁷⁰ and also have a minimum of two years' management work experience.

University of Sunderland MBA Top-Up

The University describes this⁷¹ as a 90-CATS top-up with two 15-CATS course modules (Global Corporate Strategy and International Business Environment) and a full sector-standard 60-CATS dissertation. Interestingly it is also taught via Arden University, the new private mainly distance teaching university in the UK.

Compared with 60-CATS top-ups the entry requirements are somewhat less stringent:

- EdExcel BTEC Diploma in Management Studies⁷² OR Chartered Management Institute (CMI) Executive Diploma (RQF level 7)⁷³
- a record of experience in the workplace and the ability to operate in a managerial role, with a cumulative duration of at least three months.

The University will also consider applicants who do not have standard qualifications but who have “appropriate professional and managerial experience”.

Northampton University MBA Top-up

This⁷⁴ is a 60-CATS top-up via distance learning but with the full dissertation squeezed to 50 CATS to allow room for a 10-CATS taught module “Critical issues in Business”.

Entry requirements are a minimum of two years relevant management experience and any one of a number of relevant RQF level 7 programmes:

- a Diploma in Management Studies from a British University (120 credits at Level 7/PG)
- Edexcel Extended Diploma in Strategy Management (120 credits at Level 7/PG)
- Association of Business Executives (ABE) PG Diploma in Business Management (120 credits at Level 7/PG)
- NCC Education PG Diploma in Business Management (120 credits at Level 7/PG)
- ATHE Diploma in Strategic Management (120 credits at Level 7/PG)

⁷⁰ CMI offers this programme, via distance learning, from many providers – follow the *Centre Finder* link on <http://www.managers.org.uk/education-providers/qualification-resource-library/level-7-in-strategic-management-and-leadership>

⁷¹ <https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/study/business-and-management/postgraduate-mba-top-sc/>

⁷² This has now been replaced by Edexcel Level 7 Extended Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership – see <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Detail/Index/28454?category=qualifications&query=Level%207%20Extended%20Diploma%20in%20Strategic%20Management%20and%20Leaders> for a range of these

⁷³ As far as we can judge from <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Detail/Index/12666?category=qualifications&query=CMI%20executive>

⁷⁴ <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/study/courses/master-of-business-administration-top-up-mba-2/>

But interestingly applicants “will normally be expected to hold a first or second class honours degree of a British university or equivalent.” Having made that strict point the University then details its APL approach, saying “students may be admitted on the basis of an assessment of meaningful and measureable prior learning or professional experience”.