Recognition of
Open University qualifications
outside the UK
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Recognition of Open University qualifications outside the UK

If you are intending to use your Open University (OU) qualifications to seek work or undertake further study outside the UK it is important to undertake enquiries at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure that your OU qualification or study path will meet local requirements for your chosen career or study goals.

Official recognition of qualifications gained outside the country in which you wish to work or study is complex. Each country has its own legal and administrative framework, with which you must comply, and there are supra-national directives, for example within the EU, which often add to the complexity. This is a fast-changing area, within which any advice is temporary. So you will need to inform yourself fully before seeking recognition.

You might be planning to use your UK degree as a professional qualification in finding work. However, your degree is not always sufficient. Membership of a professional body or professional status (such as Chartered Engineer), may also be required. In such cases you will need to find out if your chosen degree will allow entry to the next qualifying stage. This could include additional professional examinations and/or a period of accredited work experience.

It is the professional bodies that determine whether academic courses will provide exemptions from specific professional examinations. Your study plan should therefore be checked with the appropriate professional body in the country where you hope to work before commencement of study. You may also have to apply for national or state recognition of your qualification from the official authorities – see below for further information on applying for official recognition overseas.

It is not always necessary to seek official recognition of your degree if you are looking for work in the private sector. You should enquire of prospective employers whether or not this is demanded. Many international organisations employ OU graduates and understand that an OU degree is equal in academic standard to a degree from any other British university. Smaller employers may be less familiar with the OU and you might need to provide additional explanatory information to ensure that your qualification is fully valued. (See sample letter below)

If you wish to use your degree to gain entry to another academic institution, or to work in the public sector, you will often have no choice but to seek official academic recognition. It is preferable to do so before you commence your studies since the OU is unable to guarantee recognition in all circumstances. However, please be aware that the academic recognition process can be cumbersome, slow, and not without cost and should only be sought if you discover that you need official recognition of your qualification in order to pursue your career outside the UK.
How to seek recognition

You must follow the required procedures when seeking recognition and you will need explicit advice on how to do so before you begin. All countries within Europe have a national advice centre on recognition, known as a NARIC or ENIC centre (see www.enic-naric.net for contact details), which will give you advice free but may charge for other services. These centres also exist in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but in other countries you may have to approach the Ministry of Education or equivalent government department for advice.

If you are advised that you must approach a university or other institution in any particular country it is sensible to assume that they know very little about The Open University (OU). Therefore, we advise you to provide supporting documentation and information. For example:

- The University’s sample explanatory letter - see page 9.
- An academic transcript of your studies – in Europe this should be in the form of a Diploma Supplement if you have already graduated (you can download this from your StudentHome page).
- Module descriptions available from our website www.open.ac.uk/study and from the University’s printed prospectuses.
- An academic reference that should explain the qualification you have in a broader context. This can be requested from your student home website and should be explicit about the purposes for which you need the reference.
- You will also be required to produce an original degree certificate, sometimes this has to have an additional certification as a legal document. This involves the attachment of an apostille to authenticate the signature of the document. The Open University cannot provide this, but you can apply in person or by post to:

  The Legalisation Office
  Foreign & Commonwealth Office
  PO Box 6255
  Milton Keynes
  MK10 1XX

  For full details of this service please visit www.fco.gov.uk/legalisation.
The OU is currently accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, one of six regional higher education accreditation bodies in the USA (www.msche.org). It may be appropriate in some circumstances to refer to this as additional external evidence of OU academic quality.

However, accreditation of this kind does not guarantee automatic transfer of credit in the USA or elsewhere. Each institution makes its own decisions about credit transfer and it may take into account a variety of factors, such as how well the credits students earned at another institution fit the requirements for the program they wish to pursue, the comparability of learning goals for the courses at the other institution, the grades students received in the courses they took, whether the college they attended is accredited, and other factors that vary from one institution to another.

The only way to determine which credits (if any) a college or university will accept is to contact the institution directly. Students who know in advance that they may wish to transfer to another institution should contact the receiving institution as soon as possible about the transferability of credits.

Points to stress when seeking recognition

It is important to present your studies in a way that emphasises the quality of The Open University’s qualifications:

- Make it clear that you have not followed correspondence courses. The OU teaches through supported ‘Open Learning’ which incorporates flexible learning with one to one study support.
- An OU degree is equal in academic standard to a degree from any other British university. The University is subject to the same quality assurance procedures, through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), as all other British universities, and uses external assessors and examiners to ensure comparability of standard and level in its courses.
- Your studies may have been on a part time basis but remain equal in academic rigour, and in volume, to those of a student studying full time. It is important to stress the total amount of time that it takes to gain an OU degree.
- If you have included residential schools in your profile, do not forget to mention the intensive laboratory or practical work undertaken, and the opportunities for group work, presentations, field trips, etc.
- The University’s assessment system is rigorous. You will have had to pass both continuous assessment and a written examination in most modules. In some countries you may wish to add that each tutor-marked assignment (TMA) is the equivalent of a modular examination.
- Each module has published learning outcomes that you have to satisfy in order to pass.
Useful resources

The following information resources aim to provide some starting points for those seeking recognition of OU qualifications. However, please note that while every effort is made to ensure accuracy, information may change in the light of altered regulations or policy.

USA

American degrees are based on a modular system like Open University degrees. Systems vary from one institution to another and between states, but two of the most commonly used measures are ‘credits’ and ‘semester hours’. It is important to remember that OU credit does not represent the same amount of study as American credit. Students usually need 120–124 semester hours or 180–186 quarter-hours to graduate with a bachelors or baccalaureate degree.

On the whole it is advisable not to try to equate OU courses with American courses yourself, but rather to allow the American institution to assess their equivalence in American terms. But it might help to state the number of hours of study each course required, and to explain that the OU uses a credit system in which 120 credits are the equivalent of one full-time academic year of study, and at least 360 credits are required for a Bachelors degree with honours.

There appears to be no blanket validation available from US government courses and therefore the onus of assessment is placed on the individual employer/institution. However, there are agencies in the United States that, for a fee, will assess the equivalence of qualifications gained outside the US to those available in the US.

Two agencies we know of are:

World Education Services
Phone 00 1 212 966 6311
Fax 00 1 212 739 6100
Website www.wes.org

International Education Research Foundation
Credentials Evaluation Service
PO Box 3665
Culver City
California 90231
Phone 00 1 310 258 9451
Fax 00 1 310 342 7086
Website www.ierf.org
Continental Europe

The Bologna Process in the European Union aims to harmonise the Higher Education (HE) systems of all its signatories to increase the mobility and portability of qualifications. Amongst the reforms completed are the division of HE into three cycles (equivalent to the British honours degree, the masters degree and the doctorate) and the provision of transparent documentation of these qualifications, in the form of the Diploma Supplement (a transcript of your qualification). The OU honours and masters degrees conform to the current European qualifications framework. You can download your Diploma Supplement from your StudentHome page. This will indicate how your OU credit measures against the European credit transfer system (ECTS) but, in essence, 60 OU credit points are the equivalent of 30 ECTS points.

Please note that it is possible that undergraduate level certificates and diplomas, ordinary degrees and foundation degrees will not be given any formal academic recognition outside the UK, since they are achieved before the end of the first cycle of the common European Higher Education framework. The Bologna Process is still ongoing, and information on recognition quickly becomes outdated. For the latest information on individual countries, and for contact details of the national offices, visit the enic-naric website at www.enicnaric.net

For up-to-date information on the Bologna process visit the official website at www.ehea.info

Please remember that while the general principles of the Bologna process have been agreed throughout Europe, they are not legally binding. Individual universities and national authorities have considerable freedom concerning their interpretation and application. As a result there continue to be significant differences in the recognition of British awards. For example, an academic degree of 180 ECTS from the OU – or any other British university – might not meet the strict entry criteria for certain postgraduate programmes or for employment in the public sector in some countries outside the UK. Students are therefore strongly advised to undertake local enquiries at the earliest possible opportunity to ascertain the current position.
Support from the OU Careers Advisory Service

Students living outside the UK are entitled to all our services but should be aware that there are more examples and opportunities advertised within the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

• Students based overseas and studying through our partner organisations should check with their host organisation what services are available to them.

• When planning your career development, it is important to recognise that academic qualifications may play only a part in determining your suitability for a particular career or profession. You should also consider your skills, the content of specific courses, and the learning outcomes that are all part of OU study.

Visit our OU Careers Advisory Service website (www.open.ac.uk/careers) for information and advice on all aspects of career planning.

If you are an OU student, or if you have studied with the OU in the last three years, you can request information, advice and guidance to support your career planning and job seeking, including help to recognise and develop your employability skills.

You can contact a careers adviser by e-mail, telephone or Skype via the Contact tab on the home page of the careers website if you wish to discuss your career planning in more detail.
Sample explanatory letter

To whom it may concern

The Open University was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1969. Like other UK universities, the Open University is independent and autonomous.

The University’s academic standards are monitored by external examiners appointed from other universities and degree awarding institutions within the United Kingdom. In line with other universities in the United Kingdom, the University’s teaching and research are formally assessed by a Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE), and its quality assurance policy and procedures are audited by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). These bodies have a commitment to the improvement of quality across the higher education sector, and the University continues to place high priority on the development and enhancement of its procedures for quality assurance.

Open University degree programmes are at the UK higher education level, and degrees awarded are comparable with those awarded by other UK universities.

The University has for many years operated credit transfer arrangements with other UK universities, and participates in national schemes for credit accumulation and transfer (CATS). Our credit transfer agreements enable Open University students to transfer to another institution and continue their studies for a degree of that institution. Holders of Open University credits in appropriate subjects may be exempted from the first year of a degree course, and sometimes beyond. Similar arrangements apply to students transferring into The Open University from other universities.

The University also has schemes of academic collaboration, whereby undergraduate students can transfer to another institution for a period of study, which can then be counted towards the Open University honours degree.

Furthermore, a number of professional institutions have agreed recommended degree profiles with The Open University which, on completion, satisfy the academic element for membership of that institution. Examples include the British Psychological Society, the Royal Society of Chemistry and a number of Engineering Institutions, membership of which may lead to recognition by the Engineering Council as a Chartered Engineer.

Open University graduates compete on equal terms for entry to postgraduate courses and research degrees, and receive equal recognition for such purposes as advancement within the teaching profession.