

Short-Cycle Higher Education: An International Review

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Introduction

Talk about so-called “short-cycle” higher education (SCHE) is not new. Already in the 1970s it was discussed as a way to diversify higher education systems in the face of booming participation. In 1973, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report “Short-Cycle Higher Education. A Search for Identity” (*Ibid.*) defines “short-cycle” higher education as “[...] postsecondary education of shorter duration with strong vocational elements, generally under the nonuniversity sector of higher education [...]”. Today, the issue is still at the forefront of policy debates in many countries, not last because of the more international uniformity resulting from the Bologna agreements. The old OECD definition above raises two points of interest:

1. SCHE is non-university education
2. SCHE has inherently a strong vocational element

In turn, these two points raise two key questions, which will be addressed (with an eye to international comparison) in this review:

1. (How) does transition from SCHE to university-level study work (and how successful is it)?
2. Or is SCHE meant solely to prepare graduates for the World of Work (WoW)?

Additional questions include:

3. How many students are enrolled in SCHE programmes?
4. What are the most common SCHE programmes in different countries?

Main Points

In 2003 the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) conducted a comparative study on SCHE in Europe. This study yielded some interesting results that, in many cases, were re-stated in a European conference held in June 2009 (Kirsch and Beernaert, 2009). The next points are raised in both the above-mentioned documents:

- ❑ It is increasingly true that, while most SCHE graduates prefer to join the labour market, an increasing number of them decide to use their SCHE title to continue their studies at a full degree level. In an international comparative perspective, it is clear that “[...] very often the main and sometimes the only aim of SCHE is to give students a short professional training not linked to previous studies” (Kirsch and Beernaert, 2009, Slide 9)¹. This is the case in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey (*Ibid*)
- ❑ However, in countries where SCHE has strong links with degree programmes or are embedded in a structure of degree studies, one of the objectives is virtually always the preparation for degree studies. In the latter case, “the transition is just a further step on the ladder of learning” (Kirsch, Beernaert and Nørgaard, 2003, p.8).
- ❑ In most countries the transition is governed by legislation², by agreed principles³, or there is an integrated higher education system⁴. In a minority of countries this is not the case. Clearly, in the former transition to full degrees (which is basically recognition of prior learning) is simpler than in the latter. In the latter case students depend far more on the higher education institutions, who can decide more autonomously whether the student will be accepted or not for a degree programme and how many credits will be given for the qualifications acquired (Kirsch, Beernaert and Nørgaard, p.50)

¹ This does however not exclude the possibility to use credits from these studies for a degree programme (*Ibid*)

² Including: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and Turkey

³ United Kingdom

⁴ Sweden

- ❑ Sometimes the credits earned in SCHE can be taken into account entirely when proceeding to degree studies but in other cases they will just grant access to university or degree studies
- ❑ There is no relation between the participation rate in higher education and the occurrence of SCHE. SCHE is not necessary to boost participation figures
- ❑ However there is a relation between completion of a first tertiary-level degree and the occurrence of SCHE. The countries with the highest completion rates in higher education such as Ireland and the U.K. are countries where tertiary short cycle education or sub-degree is strongly represented (See for example Table 1 and Chart 1 on the types of, and graduation rates in, SCHE programmes in the UK)⁵. Recent data from the OECD's Education at a Glance (table A1 3a) shows that in the U.K. and Ireland the percentage of the population that has attained tertiary-type B education or tertiary-type A and advanced research programme is higher than both the OECD and the EU-19 averages. For example in the U.K. the percentage of 25-34 year olds who has attained tertiary-type B education or tertiary-type A and advanced research programme is 37% while the OECD average is 34% and the EU-19 average is 31%
- ❑ In most countries SCHE is delivered at universities and/or at other Higher Education Institution. This means that in these countries SCHE is at least more likely to be successful in supporting student transfer to full degree programmes because it is part of higher education. These countries are Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Norway, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom
- ❑ In some countries, SCHE is not delivered at or in collaboration with universities/higher education institutions (but rather at colleges and schools) so it will not really regarded as higher education. These countries are the Czech Republic, Hungary, Luxemburg, and Spain
- ❑ Although in many countries the transition is seen as fairly easy the majority of students do not make the transition to degree programmes. This is only the case in Bulgaria, Hungary and the U.K. (England and Wales) (Beernaert and Nørgaard, 2003, p.52)

⁵ It is noteworthy that the 2003 report by Kirsch, Beernaert and Nørgaard also mentions Turkey as an example of a country where there is a relation between completion of a first tertiary-level degree and the occurrence of SCHE, but this does not tally with the EAG data for 2009 reported above. While it is true that SCHE is strongly represented in Turkey (See Table 1), percentage of the population that has attained tertiary-type B education or tertiary-type A and advanced research programme is in fact lower than both the OECD and the EU 19 average (e.g. the 35-34 year olds account for only 14%)

- ❑ SCHE represents an important proportion of student population in the Bologna signatory countries. In 2003 the total number of students in SCHE was over 1.7 million (plus 826,000 in post-secondary education) over around 16 million students in higher education institutions, or 16% (Kirsch and Beernaert, 2009, Slide 7)

Short-cycle awards may differ in different countries. Below is the denomination and nature of short-cycle awards for select countries (see HETAC and NQAE, 2003).

Table 1: Short Cycle Awards by Country and their Description

Country	Short-Cycle Award	Description and Providers
Australia	Diploma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Prepares candidate for self-directed application of skills and knowledge based on fundamental principles and/or complex techniques – Recognises the capacity for initiative and judgment across a broad range of technical and/or management functions
	Advanced Diploma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Like above but more specialised qualification and signifies skill and knowledge of a greater complexity and a higher level of personal accountability than is required at a Diploma level
	Associate Degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Positioned alongside the Advanced Diploma. Two years in duration following qualifications referred to as “year 12” or equivalent, or Certificate III or IV – Emphasis on the foundational, research-based knowledge of an academic discipline. It is broad-based in conceptual and theoretical content, and often multi-disciplinary – The generic employment-related skills are appropriate to the discipline(s) – Can be a fully articulated pathway into the Bachelor Degree in the same field
Canada	Undergraduate Diploma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Two or three years in duration. – Available in a wide-range of institutions and in a wide range of disciplines. – Designed to provide learners with the theoretical knowledge and hands-on skills needed to enter the work force – Often includes practical experience with potential employers (and some include paid work experience) – Credits are recognised for the purposes of transfer and progression to full degree programmes (since the 1990s)
	Undergraduate Certificate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Usually 1 year – Available in a wide-range of disciplines, which are generally dictated by the specialisms and expertise of the providing institutions – Considerable variation in certificate programmes from institution to institution and from province to province – Credits are recognised for the purposes of transfer and progression to full degree programmes (since the 1990s)
	Associate Degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Only available in BC – Two-year academic award with an Arts or Science focus
Denmark	Vocational Academy Degree (AK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Between 1 and 3 years’ duration (normally 2 years, 120 credits) – Typically directed at an established occupational area – An AK graduate should be able to perform practice-oriented tasks based on an analytical approach within specific professions. The three “competency goals” are

Country	Short-Cycle Award	Description and Providers
		<p>defined as (1) <u>intellectual</u>, such as analytical and abstract thinking (2) <u>professional and academic</u>, such as such as specialist competencies within a specific discipline, insight into related disciplines, cross-disciplinary competencies and (3) <u>practical</u>, such as practical skills, professional ethics and responsibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The best-known programmes are the short-cycle further technical programmes, the market economics programme and the computer specialist programme – Programmes are primarily offered at the vocational colleges, i.e. the business colleges and technical colleges – After 2000 it was made simpler to transfer to medium/long degrees (i.e. full degrees) – Transition arrangements are protected by the law, though students may need to undertake bridging studies
Turkey	Pre Licentiate or Associate Degree (Önlisans Diploması)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 2-year full-time university study – Relationship between the two-year associate degree and the two-year higher education diploma is not clear – Transfer progression and articulation arrangements are difficult to source
	Higher Education Diploma (Higher Technician Diploma)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 2-year full-time study – Relationship between the two-year associate degree and the two-year higher education diploma is not clear – Transfer progression and articulation arrangements are difficult to source
United Kingdom	Foundation Degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – It is offered by universities in partnership with higher education colleges and further education colleges. It can also be delivered in the workplace, via the internet or by distance learning – A full-time Foundation Degree course takes two years, or three to four years pro-rata on a part-time basis – No standard/minimum entry requirements (decisions on eligibility are made by the university or college offering the course) – Located at the Intermediate (I) level in the Framework for higher educational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The next level up is the Honours (H) level, which covers bachelor degrees with honours – Vocationally-focused higher education qualification, designed in conjunction with private and public sector employers to meet skills shortages at the higher technician and associate professional levels (e.g. legal executives, marketing consultants, personnel officers) – It develops (1) work-specific skills relevant to a particular sector of industry, (2) key transferable skills, such as

Country	Short-Cycle Award	Description and Providers
		<p>communication and problem solving and (3) generic skills such as reasoning, professionalism and work process management</p> <p>Progression to an honours degree possible on the basis of a further 12 to 15 months full-time study.</p>
	Higher National Diploma (HND)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vocational qualification lasting usually two years full-time or three years part-time - Covers the knowledge and skills needed for training towards jobs at middle management or technician level - Provided by Colleges of Further Education, Colleges of Higher Education and some universities. - In Scotland: placed at Level 8 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (one level below the Ordinary Bachelor Degree) - In England, Wales and Northern Ireland: equivalent to the 'Intermediate' category (like the Foundation degree) - In broad terms it is considered equal to the first two years of a Bachelor Degree. Some courses run so that students can graduate with a HND after two years or elect to continue for a third year to obtain a Bachelor's degree.⁴⁶ In other instances, HND graduates can apply for entrance directly onto the second or third year of degree programmes in the same subject at different institutions, although some institutions will only accept HNDs as entry qualifications onto the first year of a degree programmes.
	Diploma of Higher Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Roughly equivalent to the Higher National Diploma - Generally consists of two years of full-time study, or 3-4 years of part-time study, and is available in a restricted range of subject areas such as Accounting, Construction, Nursing, Science and Technology and Textile design
	Higher National Certificate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offered by Colleges of Further and Higher Education - Up to 12 Credits (1 credit = 40 hours) - Progression to degree level studies possible
	Certificate of Higher Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Often administered by Adult or Continuing Education centres or departments - Designed for return-to-education learners. - Usually corresponds to the first year of a bachelor level degree - Mostly allows for progression to bachelor programmes
	Associate Degrees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accredited to award American Associate Degrees
	Associate Bachelor Degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Available at the University of Ulster only - 2-year long - More academic in nature than the Foundation Degree - Does not include work-based learning

Country	Short-Cycle Award	Description and Providers
		– Progression is into the second year of the Honours degree
United States	Associate Degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The most common of Short Cycle Degrees in the US – 2-year of full-time study or around 60 semester credits (roughly 20 courses) accumulated on a part-time basis – Include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>Occupational Associate Degrees</u> which train students for specific careers ○ <u>Transfer Associate Degrees</u> which are designed to be a first step towards a bachelor’s degree. Students on transfer associate degree programmes take the introductory courses or general education core of a baccalaureate programme (writing, literature, science and mathematics). These courses correspond to the freshman and sophomore levels of a four year programme. Students graduate with an associate in arts or associate in science degree and are eligible to transfer about half the credits they will need for their bachelor’s degree in a four year college. Generally designed for one of two objectives, (1) either to prepare the learner for an occupation, (2) or to provide a foundation for a baccalaureate degree programme – Available from public community colleges, private 2-year colleges, for-profit technical institutes, and many 4-year colleges and universities (the majority of them, however, some 86% [2003 data], are conferred by what the Carnegie Foundation classifies as ‘associate’s colleges’, i.e., colleges which offer two year associate degree and one year certificate programmes but, with few exceptions, award no bachelor degrees)
	Certificate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Normally awarded for one year of credited full-time study at a community college (or the part-time equivalent) – Normally corresponds to the first year of an associate degree programme

SCHE seems to have an increasing impact. If one looks for instance at the U.K., one sees that the absolute number of SCHE qualifications is increasing. Data from the U.K.’s Higher Education Statistics Office shows that in year 2006-2007, over a total of 51,280 full-time undergraduate degrees awarded, 7,990 were Foundation Degrees, 24,985 were Higher National Diplomas or Diploma of Higher Education and 18,305 were “other”. In year 2007-2008 the numbers increased: over a total of 59,530 full-time undergraduate degrees awarded, 9,570 were Foundation Degrees, 25,160 were Higher National Diplomas or Diploma of Higher Education and 24,795 were “other” (including the professional graduate degree in Education). In relative terms it is rather stable (see Chart 1 below). The

Foundation Degrees account for about 16% of the total full-time undergraduate awards in both years, the Higher National Diplomas or Diploma of Higher Education has decreased from 49% to 42% and the “other” has increased from 36% to 42% (the professional graduate degrees in Education playing a part in this change).

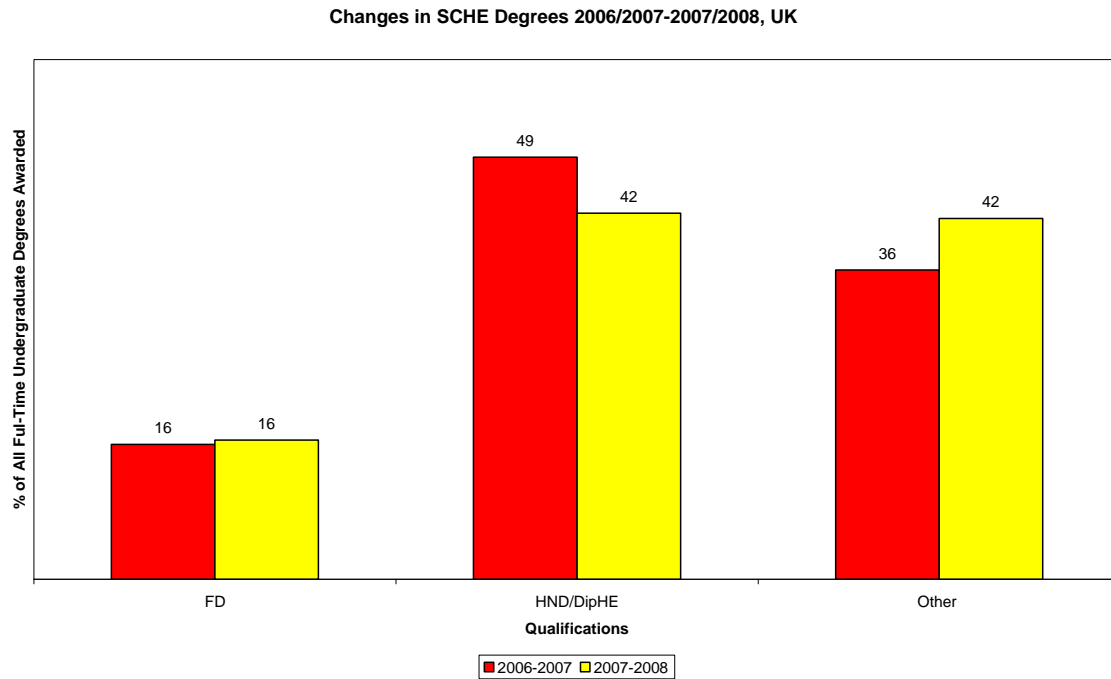


Chart 1. SCHE in the U.K. – degrees granted in Academic Year 2006-2007 and 2007-2008. Source HESA, 2009

Finally, it is of interest to measure up the impact of SCHE on success rates in achieving a full undergraduate degree (bachelor). For instance, Pascarella and Terenzini (referred to in Durst, 2009, p. 12) point out that “students are adequately matched on variables of academic aptitude, race, ethnicity, gender, and others, those who begin at a community college are at least 15% less likely to attain a bachelor’s degree than those who begin at a four-year institution”.

However, the same source mentions that most studies suggest the performance of transfer students from Community Colleges is problematic for who transfers credit hours without having completed an Associate Degree. Instead, who has achieved his/her Associate Degree is far more successful in subsequent 4-year programmes. Moreover, it was found that the number of credit hours gained is inversely proportional to subsequent performance at 4-year institutions, and an

initial drop in performance during their first semester of transfer has also been noted (*Ibid.*)

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Further reading

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