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Guidance for Graduate Apprenticeships AY 2026–27



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SUMMARY:	Guidance for universities on the delivery of Graduate Apprenticeships in Academic Year 2026–27
FAO:	Principals of Scotland’s universities, and the general public
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Guidance for Graduate Apprenticeships AY 2026–27

Introduction

1. I am writing to provide guidance on Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) for universities in Academic Year (AY) 2026-27, including eligibility criteria and reporting requirements.
2. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is accountable for funding and quality of provision of GAs delivered in Scotland's universities.
3. The University Final Funding Allocations for AY 2026-27 confirmed SFC's commitment to GAs and our expectation is that the sector will deliver an intake of at least 1,378 new GA opportunities in AY 2026-27. Universities have the flexibility to recruit above their current levels, and to vire places between frameworks that the institution has approval to deliver.

Background

4. GAs combine academic knowledge with skills development to enable participants to become more effective and productive in the workplace.
5. GAs enable access to university learning for individuals previously unable to study and work through financial constraints.
6. GAs support the Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation which aims to ensure that people have the skills they need at every stage of life to have rewarding careers and meet the demands of an ever-changing economy and society and that employers invest in the skilled employees they need to grow their businesses.
7. The Graduate Apprenticeship Enhancement Group (GAEG) has been initiated to support the development of a future policy and delivery model for GAs in line with Scotland's economic growth opportunities, skills need, the demands of employers, and the wider reform of the post-16 education landscape.

Alignment with National Outcomes and Skills Priorities

8. GAs are led by employer demand, aligned to industry needs and are designed to meet the requirements of the future workforce. The current GA frameworks can be found in [Annex A](#) with the process for development of new frameworks detailed in [Annex B](#).
9. GAs support the delivery of SFC's strategic objective to invest in education that is accessible to learners from all backgrounds, gives them a high-quality learning experience, supports them to succeed in their studies, and equips them to flourish in employment, further study and fulfilling lives.

10. GAs also support the Scottish Government’s strategic priority of high-quality learning in a system which is seamlessly connected for the learner. This includes learning which prepares people well for the world of work and successful long-term careers, prioritising provision that meets known skills gaps in the economy.
11. SFC introduced the [Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model](#) in AY 2024-25. The Outcomes Framework sets out SFC’s expectations of universities in return for the funding they receive. There are eleven outcomes for universities. GAs are particularly important in the support of the delivery of SFC’s Skills and Work-based Learning outcome:

Institutions produce confident and highly capable work-ready graduates, engaging with employers to respond to industry and sector needs, skills alignment and to co-create solutions to challenges. Students are equipped with the skills and knowledge to find employment, flourish in their career, meet employer needs and make a positive contribution to society and the economy.

12. The Assurance Model is the method by which SFC monitors and engages with institutions, so that we gain the assurance we need that the desired outcomes are achieved.
13. GAs also contribute to other outcomes such as High-Quality Learning and Teaching and Student Interests, Access and Success.

Eligibility

14. To be eligible to participate in an approved GA framework, a student must be at least 16 years of age at the start of the qualification and satisfy the criteria set out below. Universities must use all reasonable endeavours to ensure that the student meets the eligibility criteria.
15. In addition, a student must be studying for a GA in Scotland and commence the course in AY 2026-27. For this cohort, the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) will provide tuition fees. More information is available from SAAS at <https://www.saas.gov.uk/full-time/graduate-apprenticeships-funding>.

Previous study

16. Students who have previously been funded for a higher education course through UK or other EU public funds may still receive funding to study a GA. Students will still be eligible to participate in a GA when:
 - The individual holds an existing lower-level qualification in the same subject area as the GA.

- The individual holds an existing same level qualification in a different subject area as the GA.

Residency

17. To meet residency conditions, students are required to meet the residency requirements set out below:

- Have been ordinarily resident in the United Kingdom (UK), Channel Islands or Isle of Man, for three years immediately prior to the relevant date (see below for info on relevant date).
- Are ordinarily resident in Scotland on the relevant date.
- Are settled in the UK within the meaning given by Section 33 (2A) (Interpretation) of the Immigration Act.
 - Or a person who has not applied for refugee status but has been informed in writing by a person acting under the authority of the Secretary of State for the Home Department that is thought right to allow that person to enter or remain in the United Kingdom and that person has been granted leave to enter or remain accordingly which has not expired.
 - Or the spouse, civil partner or child of a person described in the sub-paragraphs above.

18. Students must also be living (ordinarily resident) in Scotland on the day their course starts. Where 'ordinarily resident' means to have 'habitual and normal residence in one place'. The Scottish Government expects someone who is ordinarily resident in Scotland to have made their home in Scotland with the intention of staying and living here, and not just to undertake a course of study. More information is available from SAAS: <https://www.saas.gov.uk/guides/residence-conditions-for-uk-nationals>.

19. The relevant dates are as follows:

- 1 August for courses that start between 1 August and 31 December.
- 1 January for courses that start between 1 January and 31 March.
- 1 April for courses that start between 1 April and 30 June.
- 1 July for courses that start between 1 July and 31 July.

Programme entry

Entry requirements

20. The university must ensure that each proposed student completes registration / enrolment and provides appropriate evidence prior to starting the GA.

21. The university will decide the formal entry requirements when developing the course. However, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and/or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) processes must be used to offer flexibility to under-represented entrants with experience and/or other industry and professional body qualifications.
22. The achievement of Foundation Apprenticeship programmes should be considered as part of formal entry requirements. In addition, universities should consider the achievement of Modern Apprenticeships and other vocational programmes as RPL, where practicable.
23. In determining eligible persons for recruitment to the GA programme, the university can apply additional and/or alternative eligibility criteria, in line with its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy.

Entry and exit points

24. GAs have flexible entry and exit points in the programme so that students can begin and end their study at the right point. The university should apply their RPL Policy to identify which year of entry to the GA is suitable for the individual. This may shorten the amount of time the GA learner is required to complete the course.
25. Universities must be able to evidence their process for agreeing the GA entry requirements, course content and assessment methods with the employer.
26. In determining eligible persons for recruitment to the GA programme, the university can apply additional and/or alternative eligibility criteria.

Employment and Employer Responsibilities

27. The work-based learning component of a GA is a significant and central part of the award. Each GA student must be in employment with an employer who has a base in Scotland, under a contract of employment relevant to the GA for a minimum of 21 hours per week. The student must spend the majority of their time working, including on the job learning, in Scotland. Universities should contact SFC regarding arrangements for part-time GAs.
28. Universities must ensure that a collaborative tripartite agreement between the institution, the student and the employer is in place and states that the students' academic learning hours are incorporated into their normal working hours.
29. SFC may, in exceptional circumstances, authorise continuation of any part of a student's GA, in the event that the student's employment status changes. Further advice and support can be obtained through the Skills and Coherent Provision Team at SFC.
30. Students following a GA framework must be subject to the same policies and procedures as other employees of the organisation with which they are employed, and the university must use all reasonable endeavours to ensure that each student is informed of this by their employer.

31. Students must be provided with a job description which clearly defines their role and study arrangements. The job description must align to the GA framework. Universities must ensure that students have a reasonable amount of time to complete study and assessment related to their GA within their working hours. Universities should ensure that students are sufficiently remunerated, and the employers pay a salary commensurate with the job role and in adherence to National Minimum Wage legislation. Employers should also be working towards the adoption of Fair Work Practices. This is applicable for the duration of the GA programme.
32. Students must also be assigned a workplace mentor to offer support throughout the GA.

Exclusions

33. If an individual is subject to an employment restriction and/or to a time limit on his/her stay in UK, they shall not be eligible to commence or continue (as applicable) the GA programme.

Change in employer

34. The student must inform the university if they are considering changing employer whilst continuing their GA. Any new job role and employer would need to be assessed by the university to ensure alignment with the GA that the student is currently studying. This would include ensuring that any new employer is adequately supported and aware of their role in delivery and assessment.
35. To allow the Partnership Action for Continuing Employment (PACE) team to provide support to the GA learner following redundancy, universities should notify the SFC Skills and Coherent Provision team at the earliest opportunity if a student is made redundant. Universities should advise SFC of the likelihood of redundancy, giving as much advanced notice as possible, to minimise disruption to the apprentice's training.

Accessibility and additional support

36. Universities must ensure that all GA programmes are designed to ensure equality of opportunity for all, with no unnecessary barriers to learning or assessment. [Annex A](#) sets out considerations for programme design, development and delivery.
37. Should a student require additional specialist equipment or support to undertake their GA, then the university shall advise and support the proposed student to apply to the Access for Work funds (or equivalent). The level of funding/support will depend on the size of the employer. The university can advise whether there are any other grant/bursaries available to the student. Students will not be entitled to any SAAS funding for additional support needs. If the student is not able to access or is not entitled to any funding from other sources, the university shall meet the costs of additional specialist equipment or support to enable the student to undertake their GA.

Funding and provision

38. GAs continue to be embedded in non-controlled funded places in AY 2026-27, and the expectation is that the sector will continue to deliver at least 1,378 new GA opportunities, though there is no upper limit if universities wish to deliver more GAs.
39. GAs are fully interchangeable with other non-controlled funded student places. An institution may choose to deliver as many GA places as they wish within their total funded places allocation.
40. Universities should notify SFC of any changes to Framework delivery, specifically if new frameworks will be undertaken or existing frameworks withdrawn. In the case of a withdrawn framework, universities should notify SFC as soon as possible.
41. In AY 2026-27, GAs will continue to be embedded in non-controlled funded places and the relevant conditions of funding, including those for under-delivery against funded places, apply. For clarification SFC will not recover funds for under-delivery of GAs if the overall non-controlled funded places target is met. Universities should comply with [SFC's Early Statistics and Early Access Returns guidance](#) on eligibility for funding.

SAAS funding – tuition fees only

42. Eligibility for a place on a GA remains at the advice and discretion of the university. The university will advise employers if their employee or candidate meets their entry criteria, is eligible to participate and, where applicable, what they need to do next to apply for tuition fees from SAAS.
43. Eligibility for a place on a GA remains at the advice and discretion of the university. The university will advise employers if their employee or candidate meets their entry criteria, is eligible to participate and, where applicable, what they need to do next to apply for tuition fees from SAAS. Students sponsored by employers not based in Scotland would not be eligible for SAAS support and the employer would be responsible for paying the tuition fees.
44. GAs starting their course in AY 2026-27 need to apply for SAAS funding. SAAS will check that the preferred candidate meets the residency requirements by being domiciled in Scotland for the duration of their GA programme. Once eligibility is confirmed, SAAS will pay the tuition fee directly to the university.

Rest of UK and International students

45. This guidance applies to Scottish-domiciled undergraduate entrants. Universities are permitted to recruit students from the Rest of the United Kingdom (RUK) and internationally onto Graduate Apprenticeships.

46. RUK and international students must comply with all operational and academic requirements set out in this guidance, with the sole exception of the requirement for employment with an employer that has a significant Scottish operation.
47. For clarity, students undertaking a GA as RUK or as an international student must not use any SFC non-controlled funded places or Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) funding. Instead, they must be classified and administered strictly as RUK or international students, as appropriate, for all fee and funding purposes.

Monitoring and Reporting

48. GA reporting in AY 2026-27 will mirror requirements in place for other undergraduate programmes through university reporting, early stats returns, and HESA returns. The requirements for reporting through HESA can be found on the [HESA website](#).
49. In addition, SFC's Skills and Coherent Provision team and the Assurance and Outcomes team will meet with universities to discuss GA progress and delivery and determine provision for the subsequent academic year.
50. The indicative timeline for SFC / Institutional engagement is set out below:
 - October 2026: Request for GA recruitment data.
 - November-December 2026: Engagement to discuss progress to date, delivery and any operational challenges.
 - March-April 2027: Engagement with GA providers on GA delivery and plans for next AY.
51. We require that you make outcome evidence available to SFC for performance management purposes. The purpose of the evidence is to provide the necessary assurance that you have delivered the GA programme in accordance with the terms of this guidance.
52. Universities must provide data returns requested by SFC to the deadlines and standards specified.
53. SFC is committed to processing any personal data fairly, transparently and in accordance with the law. See [SFC's privacy notice](#) for further details. SFC will use the information submitted by universities to provide regular updates to the Scottish Government on the current uptake and use of funding. The [Scottish Government's privacy notice](#) is available on their website.

Quality management

54. The Quality Standards that apply to GA providers can be accessed in the SDS Learning Provider area of www.apprenticeships.scot. Under Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF), SFC expects universities to have in place processes for assuring and enhancing academic standards and the quality of the student experience. This includes an expectation that institutions operate systems of annual monitoring and periodic Institution Led Quality Review (ILQR) across the full range of their provision, including GAs. Outcomes of these activities should include identifying areas of both improvement and good practice, and a coherent action plan to deliver enhancement for consideration at institutional level. The mechanism for reporting the outcomes of annual monitoring and ILQR to SFC is through the Self Evaluation and Action Plan. Further information on SFC's expectations for quality can be found in [SFC's Guidance on Quality for Colleges and Universities 2024-25 to 2030-31](#).
55. Under TQEF, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) leads on the delivery of cyclical external peer review of all credit bearing provision in Scotland's colleges and universities. QAA also maintains ongoing engagement with institutions to support quality assurance and enhancement and to follow up on review activity. Further information on TQEF is available on the [SFC website](#) and on TQER on the [QAA website](#).
56. The Quality Standards that apply to GA Providers can be accessed in the SDS Learning Provider area of www.apprenticeships.scot.
57. The Quality Standards assess the extent to which each provider maintains capacity and capability to successfully deliver quality provider services throughout the period of delivery.
58. SFC expects institutions to utilise these Quality Standards, combined with existing quality assurance and enhancement arrangements, to ensure a high-quality experience for GA students.
59. If a GA learner expresses dissatisfaction with their course, then the expectation is that the university will handle these in the first instance through their normal complaints handling procedures.

Marketing and communications requirements

60. In promoting GAs, the university should take appropriate positive action in marketing with a view to improving representation where there is clear imbalance in provision, targeting gender, disability, ethnicity and people who have been in care.
61. In acknowledgement of SFC's funding contribution, [our logo](#) must be displayed on any publicity material relating to GAs (signage, posters, website, etc.). You will also be required to display other logos in recognition of GA delivery – full details are contained within the marketing toolkit on www.apprenticeships.scot/resources.

Further information

62. To complement the above guidance, here are links to the [Graduate Apprenticeship Delivery Toolkit](#) and [Frequently Asked Questions](#).
63. Any queries/requests for further information should be directed to this e-mail: apprenticeships@sfc.ac.uk.

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Annex A

GA frameworks

1. The curriculum and the methods of delivery and assessment for each GA sectoral framework are based on employer identified current and near-future needs. This provides a benchmark against which the delivery of the programme is developed and can be quality assured as a GA.
2. GAs are work-based learning programmes at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 9, 10 or 11 which are nationally recognised, accredited, and certificated by universities. They lead to an undergraduate degree or postgraduate award.

Frameworks	SCQF levels
Accounting with Professional Accreditation	10 and 11
Business Management	10
Business Management: Business Analysis	10
Business Management: Project Management	10
Civil Engineering	10
Construction and the Built Environment	10
Cyber Security	10 and 11
Data Science	10
Early Learning and Childcare	9
Engineering: Design and Manufacture	10
Engineering: Instrumentation, Measurement and Control	10
IT: Management for Business	10
IT: Software Development	10
Operating Department Practice	9
Social Work	10

Annex B

Programme design, development and delivery

- Universities must ensure that SFC is involved in the approval process of all new GA programmes. The formal outcome of any approval process should be reported by SFC through your [Outcome Manager](#) (OM).
- Universities must consult employers in the design and development of all GA programmes.
- Universities should seek to ensure that GA programmes are based on industry needs and have been co-designed with employers to deliver business requirements.
- Universities should seek to gain professional body accreditation of all GA programmes prior to programme start date (where a relevant body exists).
- Universities must ensure that students and employers know what is expected of them in the delivery of the GA programme. Universities must provide the student and employer with a learning and assessment timetable before the course start date, covering on-campus and work-based learning.
- Universities must ensure that both the student and employer are offered an induction process to the GA programme.

Approval of GA programmes

- For new GA programmes, each university will undertake a programme validation, whereby all new programmes are subject to formal consideration and approval prior to implementation.
- The format of any validation event will depend on a university's own internal processes. However, as a minimum, a panel should be convened that includes SFC representation to examine the quality and standards of the proposed programme and ensure they align to the published GA Framework requirements.
- Universities should provide documentation to SFC at least 10 days in advance of a validation event. This documentation should, as a minimum, include a programme specification document (that includes the rationale for the development of the GA programme, evidence of employer demand and how the programme fits with your institutions strategic planning for work based learning); a programme mapping exercise that clearly demonstrates that the learning outcomes meet the requirements of the associated GA Framework; and detailed module descriptors that include how each module will be taught and assessed.

- The purpose of a validation event is to take a decision on the approval (or validation) of the GA programme subject to your university's regular quality review processes.

Review and re-approval of GA programmes

- Subject to the university's own Institution-Led Quality Review (ILQR) processes, each GA programme will be required to undergo a formal review process. This is normally every six years (including the course re-approval element of it). When the university prepares for their ILQR a year in advance, this will involve engagement with relevant stakeholders, including SDS and SFC, learners and employers.
- If there are significant changes being proposed as part of the ILQR, this will require a re-validation event with a validation Panel and should follow the validation process as above (Approval of GA programmes).
- Where there are no significant changes required to a programme, or a programme has recently been validated ahead of the ILQR, these should be re-approved internally. However, course teams will still be required to liaise with SDS and SFC to obtain written confirmation that any changes, particularly relating to learning outcomes or assessment, remain aligned to the requirements set out within the published GA Framework.