



**QAA**

A large graphic composed of several interlocking puzzle pieces. The central piece is a dark grey circle containing the title. Surrounding it are larger, light grey puzzle pieces, some of which have purple puzzle pieces attached to their edges. The overall shape is roughly circular but extends to the right.

# UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Part A: Setting and maintaining  
threshold academic standards

Chapter A1: The national level

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# Introduction

The following incorporates *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 2008, and *The framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS)*, published by QAA in 2001, and forms a Chapter of the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

## The Quality Code

The Quality Code is the definitive reference point for all those involved in delivering higher education which leads to an award from or is validated by a UK higher education provider. It makes clear what institutions are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of all higher education providers. These Expectations express key matters of principle that the higher education community has identified as important for the assurance of quality and academic standards.

## About this Chapter

This Chapter comprises the existing qualifications frameworks, namely:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*
- *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS).*

# Expectations about the use of the qualification frameworks

The Quality Code sets out the following specific Expectation about the use of qualification frameworks which higher education institutions are required to meet:

**Each qualification (including those awarded under collaborative arrangements) is allocated to the appropriate level in the FHEQ or FQHEIS, as applicable.**

The remainder of this Chapter is divided into two sections, the first of which covers the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup>, while the second details the framework for Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As published in 2008 with minor changes.

<sup>2</sup> As published in 2001 with minor changes.

# Section 1: The FHEQ

## Section 1.1: Introduction

This guidance is about the implementation of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). It applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates) granted by a higher education provider<sup>3</sup> in the exercise of its degree awarding powers.

The FHEQ is an important reference point for providers of higher education. The FHEQ, and associated guidance for implementation, has been written to assist higher education providers to maintain academic standards; to inform international comparability of academic standards, especially in the European context; to ensure international competitiveness; and to facilitate student and graduate mobility. Higher education providers may find it useful to refer to the FHEQ in their discussions with the main stakeholders in higher education (prospective students, parents, schools and employers) about the outcomes and attributes that each qualification represents.

The fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment rather than years of study. Qualification descriptors are key to this premise. Qualification descriptors set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of individual qualifications. The qualification descriptors contained in the FHEQ exemplify the outcomes and attributes expected of learning that results in the award of higher education qualifications. These outcomes represent the integration of various learning experiences resulting from designated and coherent programmes of study. These qualifications, which develop graduates with high level analytical skills and a broad range of competences, are therefore distinct from training or solely the acquisition of higher level skills.

The FHEQ is also used as a reference point in institutional review and other forms of external review. Review teams will examine the means which higher education providers use to ensure that their awards and qualifications are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in the FHEQ, and that higher education providers are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner. In particular, audit and review teams will wish to look at how higher education providers check the alignment between the academic standards of their awards and the levels referred to in the FHEQ. In this regard, the FHEQ should be regarded as a framework, not as a straitjacket.

Section 1.3 of this document describes the main features of the FHEQ, section 1.4 contains the qualification descriptors and section 1.5 provides guidance on specific aspects in the implementation of the FHEQ.

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<sup>3</sup> The term higher education provider is used throughout as a generic term. Higher education providers are expected to act in accordance with the limits of their degree awarding powers and/or responsibilities as providers of higher education.

## Section 1.2: Background

A national framework for higher education qualifications was proposed originally in the Dearing report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). The FHEQ was first published in 2001. It was developed and is maintained by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in accordance with the recommendations of the Dearing report. The second edition (2008) was developed with the assistance of an advisory group and incorporated feedback gained from extensive discussion and consultation with the HE sector and its stakeholders.

Higher education providers should be able to demonstrate that all students commencing programmes after the start of the 2003-04 academic year would gain, on successful completion, qualifications that were awarded in accordance with the FHEQ.

There is a parallel higher education qualifications framework document for Scotland<sup>4</sup> that reflects the features of its different education system, while making clear the many similarities and alignments with the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The two frameworks share many core purposes and features.

At the postgraduate levels, the two higher education frameworks have common structures, qualification titles and qualification descriptors. Below the postgraduate levels, the honours degree level in Scotland and level 6 in the FHEQ are considered to be in broad alignment. Below level 6, the frameworks reflect the particular features of the different educational structures and contexts.

Within the UK and Ireland there are also frameworks of school and vocational qualifications managed by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)<sup>5</sup>, and integrated overarching credit and qualifications frameworks in Scotland, *The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)*<sup>6</sup> (of which *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* is a constituent part) and *The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*<sup>7</sup> (of which the FHEQ is a constituent part).

Increasingly, higher education institutions, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The frameworks for higher education qualifications throughout the UK are designed to meet the Expectations of the Bologna Declaration<sup>8</sup> and thus align with *The Framework for Qualifications of the European higher education area (FQ-EHEA)*<sup>9</sup>. As such, the labels used to distinguish the different levels of the FQ-EHEA (short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle)

<sup>4</sup> The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland forms section 2 of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Further information about Ofqual - which superseded the QCA - can be accessed at: [www.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk).

<sup>6</sup> Further information about the SCQF can be accessed at: [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk).

<sup>7</sup> Further information about the CQFW can be accessed at: [www.elwa.ac.uk/elwaweb/elwa.aspx?pageid=1612](http://www.elwa.ac.uk/elwaweb/elwa.aspx?pageid=1612) (will migrate to [www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk)).

<sup>8</sup> The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: An explanation can be accessed at: [www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf](http://www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Further information on The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area can be accessed at: [www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf).

have also been incorporated into the FHEQ. A European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)<sup>10</sup> has also been agreed by the European Commission and it is expected that the FHEQ will also be compatible with this framework.

## Section 1.3: Main features of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)

### The purpose of the FHEQ

Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications.

The main purposes of the FHEQ are to:

- provide important points of reference for setting and assessing academic standards to higher education providers and their external examiners
- assist in the identification of potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning
- promote a shared and common understanding of the Expectations associated with typical qualifications by facilitating a consistent use of qualifications titles across the higher education sector.

As a result, the FHEQ should enable higher education providers to communicate to employers; schools; parents; prospective students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs); and other stakeholders for the achievements and attributes represented by the typical higher education qualification titles.

QAA auditors and reviewers use the FHEQ as a reference point when auditing or reviewing the establishment and management of academic standards by higher education providers. In particular, auditors and reviewers look at how institutions align the academic standards of their awards with the levels referred to in the FHEQ.

They also ascertain whether institutions have means of ensuring that awards and qualifications are of an academic standard at least consistent with the standards referred to in the FHEQ. Similarly, the FHEQ is an important tool for PSRBs in defining and using qualifications in the context of their accreditation processes.

### Relationships between the frameworks of the UK and Ireland

The levels of the FHEQ, with examples of typical qualifications at each level, are represented in table 1.

In the UK and Ireland, each stage within any framework of qualifications, be it school, vocational, further or higher education, is commonly referred to as a 'level'. In practice, most such levels represent bands of qualifications that share similar Expectations of attainment. The FHEQ has five levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. These are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher

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<sup>10</sup> Further information about the EQF can be accessed at:  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm).

education in The National Qualifications Framework and The Qualifications and Credit Framework (NQF/QCF).

The FHEQ is a qualifications framework. Each level is illustrated by, and each award determined by reference to, a qualification descriptor. The qualification descriptors of the FHEQ reflect five distinct levels of intellectual achievements associated with the typical higher education qualifications awarded by higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in accordance with their degree awarding powers.

Typically, programmes leading to higher education qualifications, particularly those taken over a number of years, include learning that is progressively more challenging. For the award of a higher education qualification at a particular level, the outcomes of this learning must reflect, in a holistic way, the qualification descriptor for that level.

A complementary approach, used by some other frameworks within the UK and Ireland, is to use (credit) level descriptors to determine the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy associated with a particular level of learning and achievement.

To convey the relative position of levels of achievement and/or qualifications, it is convenient to number them. However, there is a need to avoid confusion with the numbering of levels in the various frameworks of the UK and Ireland. The authorities responsible for the maintenance of credit and qualification frameworks of the UK and Ireland have produced a guide to comparing the main qualifications offered in each country - qualifications can cross boundaries.<sup>11</sup> This guide enables comparisons to be drawn between qualifications and their levels, rather than direct equivalences.

## Relationship between the FHEQ and European developments

Within the FQ-EHEA, the term cycle is used to describe the three sequential levels identified by the Bologna Process (first cycle - which can include short cycle qualifications, second cycle and third cycle) within which all European higher education qualifications are located. In broad terms, the first cycle corresponds to undergraduate awards (typically bachelor's degrees), the second cycle and third cycles to postgraduate awards (typically master's degrees and doctoral degrees, respectively).

Similar to the FHEQ, the FQ-EHEA has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle, known as the Dublin descriptors.<sup>12</sup> They illustrate the typical abilities and achievements associated with qualifications that signify the completion of each cycle. The Dublin descriptors are shown in Appendix 1 and may be used by higher education providers as an additional reference point.

In many other European countries, as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a range of higher education qualifications are available to students who have undertaken a programme of study within the FQ-EHEA first cycle, but which do not represent the full extent of achievement for this cycle. These qualifications are referred to as higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) awards. Such awards may prepare students for employment while also providing preparation for, and access to, studies for completion of the first cycle.

<sup>11</sup> Accessible at [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.aspx)

<sup>12</sup> The Dublin descriptors were originally developed by the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI). Further information about the JQI can be accessed at: [www.jointquality.org](http://www.jointquality.org).



Table 1 indicates the relationship between the levels of the FHEQ and the cycles of the FQ-EHEA. For the purpose of this document, the term levels will be used throughout.

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ level <sup>13</sup>	Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle
Doctoral degrees (eg, PhD/DPhil (including new-route PhD), EdD, DBA, DClInPsy) <sup>14</sup>	8	Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Master's degrees (eg, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Integrated master's degrees <sup>15</sup> qualifications (eg, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm)		
Postgraduate diplomas		
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) <sup>16</sup>		
Postgraduate certificates	6	First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg BA/BSc Hons)		
Bachelor's degrees		
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)		
Graduate diplomas		
Graduate certificates		

<sup>13</sup> Formerly, the levels were identified as Certificate (C), Intermediate (I), Honours (H), Masters (M) and Doctoral (D) level.

<sup>14</sup> Professional doctorate programmes include some taught elements in addition to the research dissertation. Practice varies but typically professional doctorates include postgraduate study equivalent to a minimum of three full-time calendar years with level 7 study representing no more than one-third of this.

<sup>15</sup> Integrated master's degree programmes typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7. Thus study at bachelor's level is integrated with study at master's level and the programmes are designed to meet the level 6 and level 7 qualification descriptors in full.

<sup>16</sup> In April 2005, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, the Standing Conference of Principals, Universities UK, and QAA issued a joint statement on the PGCE qualification title. The full statement may be accessed at [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/qualifications](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/qualifications).

Foundation Degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc)	5	Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		
Higher National Diplomas (HND) <sup>17</sup>		
Higher National Certificates (HNC)	4	
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)		

Table 1: The relationship between the levels of the FHEQ and the cycles of the FQ-EHEA

### Positioning qualifications within the FHEQ

When positioning higher education qualifications within the FHEQ, higher education providers will wish to assure the public that the achievements represented by qualifications are appropriate and represented consistently. Higher education providers are responsible for demonstrating that each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ. In considering the appropriate level for a qualification, higher education providers consider:

- the relationship between the intended outcomes of the programme and the expectations set out in the qualification descriptors
- whether there is a sufficient volume of assessed study that will demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved
- whether the design of the curriculum and assessments is such that all students following the programme have the opportunity to achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes.

When designing and approving programmes, higher education providers will wish to ensure that a coherent learning experience is delivered and that due consideration is given to the Expectations and Indicators relating to programme design in *Chapter A3: The programme level* and *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval* of the Quality Code. In addition, higher education providers will wish to take account of the regulatory and other requirements of the PSRBs which accredit specific professional programmes.

Not all higher education qualifications will meet the qualification descriptors in full. For example, table 1 lists the typical higher education qualifications at each level but not all of the qualifications at each level will meet all of the expectations of the qualification descriptor. The qualifications are differentiated by the volume of learning and this in turn leads to variation in the range of intended learning outcomes. Some qualifications (for instance Foundation Degrees) have been specifically designed to facilitate progression to subsequent levels. Section 1.4 provides further information about the qualification descriptor for each level of the framework and gives examples of qualifications that meet each descriptor in full, and where the qualification descriptor can be used as a reference point for other qualifications at the same level.

<sup>17</sup> Higher National Certificates (HNCs) are positioned at level 4, to reflect typical practice.

Further guidance, designed to assist institutions in achieving consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, nature and subjects of study is available under Naming qualifications.

## Section 1.4: Qualification descriptors

Descriptors exemplify the nature and characteristics of the main qualification at each level, and comparison demonstrates the nature and characteristics of change between qualifications at different levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications. However, the FHEQ has the flexibility to accommodate diversity and innovation, and to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises.

Qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part will be of particular relevance to higher education providers in designing, approving and reviewing academic programmes. They will need to be satisfied that, for any programme, the curriculum and assessments provide all students with the opportunity to achieve, and to demonstrate achievement of, the intended outcomes.

The second part is a statement of the wider abilities that the typical student could be expected to have developed. It will be of assistance to higher education providers during discussions with employers, and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of the qualification.

Each descriptor sets out the outcomes for the typical qualification at each level - for levels 6, 7 and 8 this is usually a degree. Naming qualifications provides further guidance on the naming of qualifications and specifically the use of the title degree for both undergraduate and postgraduate awards at all levels.

At most levels there may be more than one type of qualification which can be achieved. Short programmes are often offered as continuing professional development opportunities. The qualification descriptors provide points of reference that will help institutions determine at which level of the FHEQ any qualifications resulting from such programmes should be placed. The guidance on naming qualifications may be used to determine an appropriate title. A range of qualifications are encompassed by each level of the FHEQ. Each level is deliberately broad to provide flexibility and space for the development of new qualifications, for example, occupationally related awards.

QAA will keep under review the need for any additional qualification descriptors, or amendment to them, in the light of the development of other points of reference, such as benchmark statements or European developments, for example arising from the Bologna Process.

### Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 4: Certificate of Higher Education

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any Certificate of Higher Education which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 4 qualifications.

Certificates of Higher Education are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study
- an ability to present, evaluate and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, in order to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work
- communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments
- undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

Holders of a Certificate of Higher Education will have a sound knowledge of the basic concepts of a subject, and will have learned how to take different approaches to solving problems. They will be able to communicate accurately and will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility. The Certificate of Higher Education may be a first step towards obtaining higher level qualifications.

### Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5: Foundation Degree

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any Foundation Degree which should meet the descriptor in full.

This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 5 qualifications, including Diplomas of Higher Education, Higher National Diplomas, and so on.

Foundation Degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- knowledge and critical understanding of the well established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed
- ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context
- knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study

- an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis
- effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences, and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively
- undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

The Foundation Degree is an example of a qualification that meets, in full, the Expectations of the qualification descriptor (and the Foundation Degree qualification benchmark). Further details of the Foundation Degree Qualification benchmark may be found in *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level* of the Quality Code.

Holders of qualifications at this level will have developed a sound understanding of the principles in their field of study, and will have learned to apply those principles more widely. Through this, they will have learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems. Their studies may well have had a vocational orientation, for example HNDs, enabling them to perform effectively in their chosen field. Holders of qualifications at this level will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

## Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6: Bachelor's degree with honours

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any bachelor's degree with honours which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 6 qualifications, including bachelor's degrees, graduate diplomas and so on.

Bachelor's degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline
- an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline

- to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline
- an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge
- the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects
- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem
- communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
  - the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements and to communicate them effectively.

Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.

Bachelor's degrees with honours form the largest group of higher education qualifications. Typically, learning outcomes for these programmes would be expected to be achieved on the basis of study equivalent to three full-time academic years and lead to awards with titles such as Bachelor of Arts, BA (Hons) or Bachelor of Science, BSc (Hons). In addition to bachelor's degrees at this level are short courses and professional 'conversion' courses, based largely on undergraduate material, and taken usually by those who are already graduates in another discipline, leading to, for example, graduate certificates or graduate diplomas.

## Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7: Master's degree

The descriptor provided for this level of the framework is for any master's degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 7 qualifications, including postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas.

Master's degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice
- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship
- originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline
  - to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level
- continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations
  - the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

Much of the study undertaken for master's degrees will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Students will have shown originality in the application of knowledge, and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They will be able to deal

with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they will show originality in tackling and solving problems. They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility, and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

Master's degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses, programmes of research or a mixture of both. Longer, research-based programmes may lead to the degree of MPhil. The learning outcomes of most master's degree courses are achieved on the basis of study equivalent to at least one full-time calendar year and are taken by graduates with a bachelor's degree with honours (or equivalent achievement).

Master's degrees are often distinguished from other qualifications at this level (for example, advanced short courses, which often form parts of continuing professional development programmes and lead to postgraduate certificates and/or postgraduate diplomas) by an increased intensity, complexity and density of study. Master's degrees - in comparison to postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas - typically include planned intellectual progression that often includes a synoptic/research or scholarly activity.

Some master's degrees, for example in science, engineering and mathematics, comprise an integrated programme of study spanning several levels where the outcomes are normally achieved through study equivalent to four full-time academic years. While the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves meet the Expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7 in full, such qualifications are often termed integrated master's as an acknowledgement of the additional period of study at lower levels (which typically meets the Expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6).

First degrees in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science comprise an integrated programme of study and professional practice spanning several levels. While the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves typically meet the Expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7, these qualifications may often retain, for historical reasons, titles of Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery, Bachelor of Dental Surgery, Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine or Bachelor of Veterinary Science, and are abbreviated to MBChB or BM BS, BDS, BvetMed and BVSc respectively.

**Note**

The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are not academic qualifications. The MA is normally granted, on application, to graduates of these universities with a Bachelor of Arts (BA). No further study or assessment is required, but the recipient may be required to pay a fee.

At the University of Oxford, the MA may be granted during or after the twenty-first term from matriculation and at the University of Cambridge, the MA may be granted six years after the end of the first term.



## Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8: Doctoral degree

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any doctoral degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 8 qualifications.

Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems
- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

Doctoral degrees are awarded for the creation and interpretation, construction and/or exposition of knowledge which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research.

Holders of doctoral degrees will be able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Holders of doctoral degrees will have the qualities needed for employment that require both the ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields and an innovative approach to tackling and solving problems. Doctoral programmes that may include a research component but which have a substantial taught element (for example, professional doctorates), lead usually to awards which include the name of the discipline in their title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education or DCLinPsy for Doctor of Clinical Psychology). Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge.

The titles PhD and DPhil are commonly used for doctoral degrees awarded on the basis of original research.

Achievement of outcomes consistent with the qualification descriptor for the doctoral degree normally requires study equivalent to three full-time calendar years.

Higher doctorates may be awarded in recognition of a substantial body of original research undertaken over the course of many years. Typically a portfolio of work which has been previously published in a peer-refereed context is submitted for assessment. Most higher education awarding bodies restrict candidacy to graduates or academic staff of several years' standing.

**Note**

Honorary doctoral degrees are not academic qualifications.

### The relationship between qualification descriptors and other points of reference for academic standards

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Qualification descriptors are linked to other parts of the Quality Code in the following ways.

Qualification descriptors are generic statements of the intended outcomes of study. Many academic programmes aim to develop general and specific skills. These are not explicitly addressed in the qualification descriptors as many skills, and the extent to which they need to be developed, are discipline or profession-specific. As such, they are addressed more appropriately in subject benchmark statements and individual programme specifications. Further information on the subject benchmark statements will be found in *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level* of the Quality Code, while guidance relating to programme specifications will be found in *Chapter A3: The programme level*.

More detailed statements on the expected outcomes in particular subjects can be found in subject benchmark statements. These have been produced for typical and threshold standards in bachelor's degrees with honours, and have been produced for other levels where there is significant taught provision in a subject (for example, MEng). A single qualifications benchmark statement has also been produced to provide a reference point for the Foundation Degree qualification. Details of this can also be found in *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level* of the Quality Code.

In areas where there is no benchmark statement, or where more than one such statement may be relevant, the statements of generic outcomes contained in the qualification descriptors provide a particularly important point of reference.

Specific statements about the intended outcomes of an individual programme are provided by institutions in programme specifications. These define the specific outcomes of learning for a qualification in a particular subject area offered by that institution.

The achievements of an individual student on a given programme are recorded in a transcript and on completion of a programme of study a Diploma Supplement will be issued.

## Assessment

Effective and appropriate assessment is essential to the operation of a qualifications framework based on learning outcomes. It is the assessment of the outcomes of learning that is important, rather than the nature of any component element of study.

For example, a student may, in an appropriate learning environment, build on introductory material and be assessed against the outcomes of a qualification at a level above that associated with the introductory material alone.

See also *Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes*, and *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning* of the Quality Code, particularly Indicator 8 of Chapter B6 which deals with rules and regulations for progressing from one stage of a programme to another and for qualifying for an award. See also *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code, particularly Indicator 1 which deals with general principles.

## Qualifications, volumes of learning and credit

The FHEQ is a qualifications framework, based on the outcomes represented by the main qualification titles. It is not a credit framework, nor is it dependent on the use of credit. Nevertheless, credit is widely used by higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In England, the Credit Issues Development Group has drawn up a national credit framework and provided guidance in accordance with these recommendations. While the framework and guidance are advisory and their application remains a matter for individual institutions to decide on at their discretion, English institutions that elect to use credit are strongly encouraged to read, in conjunction with the FHEQ, *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*.<sup>18</sup>

In Wales, all higher education institutions have signed up to the CQFW Credit Common Accord. Welsh institutions are encouraged to read, in conjunction with the FHEQ, the recommendations and guidelines as set out in the *CQFW Credit Common Accord*.<sup>19</sup>

For any qualification, study leading directly to the qualification will normally build on learning from earlier stages of a programme of study, or from other assessed prior learning. Providers of higher education programmes need to be able to demonstrate how the design of curricula facilitates academic and intellectual progression. However, it is for providers to decide how this is best demonstrated, whether by a credit structure or otherwise. There is no assumption that internal progression should be demonstrated by reference to the descriptors of outcomes of intermediate qualifications, if these are not offered by the institution. It is not the purpose of the FHEQ to prescribe the internal organisation of academic programmes.

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<sup>18</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Aug..aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Aug..aspx).

<sup>19</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/creditqualificationsframework/?lang=en>.

The design of academic programmes has to make some assumptions about the amount of learning that is likely to be necessary to achieve the intended outcomes. In some cases this will be expressed in terms of study time, for example a number of academic years. In other cases this will be expressed through credit. The FHEQ itself does not specify minimum or typical volumes of learning by reference to units of credit. However, the credit frameworks for both England and Wales provide guidance on the credit volumes associated with the typical qualifications at each level of the FHEQ. The guidance in these credit frameworks can also support a consistent approach to academic standards across the higher education sector.

The outcomes associated with a qualification should be understood in a holistic way, and their achievement should be demonstrated directly. However, different qualifications within the same level will have different volumes of learning which will lead to a different range of learning outcomes. For example, a degree can properly be awarded only when the expectations of the relevant qualification descriptor have been met or exceeded. Within an overall programme, the intended learning outcomes required for a degree are unlikely to be achieved in less than the equivalent of one academic year's full-time study. Diplomas generally indicate a smaller volume of learning than a degree but a larger volume than certificates (and an associated differentiation in the range of intended learning outcomes). A range of diplomas and certificates are offered by higher education providers. If positioned at level 7 they are titled postgraduate certificates and diplomas, and if positioned at level 6 they are titled graduate certificates and diplomas. Other certificates and diplomas will generally be positioned at levels 4 or 5. See Naming qualifications (Section 1.5) for guidance on the nature of qualification titles and specifically use of the title degree.

## Section 1.5: The FHEQ - implementation issues and guidance

The following guidance identifies key matters that a higher education provider should be able to demonstrate it is addressing effectively through its own quality assurance mechanisms. The accompanying explanatory text is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but for many higher education providers it will constitute appropriate good practice.

### Naming qualifications

**The title of any qualification accurately reflects the level of achievements, represents appropriately the nature and field(s) of study undertaken and is not misleading.**

Public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications requires a transparent use of qualification titles. The following guidance is designed to assist institutions in achieving clarity and consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, nature and subjects of study.

#### Level

To ensure that the name given to any qualification within the FHEQ appropriately represents its level, and to promote public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications, clarity in the use of qualification titles is required. The following guidance is designed to assist higher education providers in achieving clarity and consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey

accurately information about the level of the qualification.

- The titles honours (for example, bachelor's degree with honours), master (for example, Master of Arts) and doctor (for example, Doctor of Philosophy) should be used only for qualifications that meet, in full, the Expectations of the qualification descriptors at level 6, level 7 and level 8 respectively.
- Titles with the stem postgraduate (for example, postgraduate diploma) should be restricted to qualifications where the learning outcomes of the programme of study match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at level 7 or above.
- Titles with the stem graduate (for example, graduate diploma) should be used for qualifications from programmes of study that typically require graduate entry, or its equivalent, and have learning outcomes that match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at level 6.

A programme leading to a graduate certificate or graduate diploma might have some level 7 outcomes, but use of the postgraduate title for the award would be justified only if most or all of the outcomes were assessed at level 7.

A qualification from a short, non-degree programme, having outcomes that correspond to some aspects of a qualification descriptor, might be placed at the same level as the main qualification to which that descriptor refers. For example, a short course might have outcomes requiring the demonstration of understanding and critical awareness of some current problems at the forefront of an area of professional practice, but not a practical understanding of techniques of research. An institution might reasonably determine that the qualification should be at level 7. In this instance, the title 'postgraduate diploma' or 'postgraduate certificate' could be used.

### **Nature**

The titles Foundation Degree, bachelor's degree with honours, master's degree and doctoral degree should be used only in respect of qualifications at levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 respectively, which are awarded for achievement in full of the outcomes set out in the relevant qualification descriptor. For Foundation Degrees, at level 5, the qualification should also meet the expectation of the Foundation Degree qualification benchmark (see *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level of the Quality Code*).

Use of the abbreviated titles PhD and DPhil should be restricted to qualifications where assessment is solely by a final thesis or published work, or by artefact or performance that is accompanied by a written commentary placing it in its academic context.

The abbreviated title MPhil should normally be reserved for qualifications awarded following extended master's courses that typically involve a substantial element of research or equivalent enquiry.

When used with the stems graduate or postgraduate, the title certificate should normally signify learning outcomes which would imply study equivalent to at least one-third of a full-time academic year, and the title diploma should normally signify study equivalent to at least two-thirds of a full-time academic year.

## **Subject**

Titles used for doctoral qualifications awarded after programmes that include a substantial taught element should normally include the name of the discipline in the title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education).

Qualification titles that reflect the subject focus of programmes of study in two disciplines (for example, a joint honours award) should consider nomenclatures based on:

- A and B, where there is an approximately equal balance between two components
- A with B, for a major/minor combination where the minor subject accounts for at least a quarter of the programme.

Qualification titles should not normally reflect more than three subject components. Where there are more than three significant components, the title Combined Studies would be appropriate.

## **Awarding qualifications**

**Qualifications are awarded to mark the achievement of positively defined outcomes, not as compensation for failure at a higher level, or by default.**

Failure at a higher level does not mean that a lower qualification cannot be awarded. However, where a student does not demonstrate the outcomes set out in a qualification descriptor, a lower qualification should only be awarded if the student has demonstrated the outcomes required for that qualification.

Higher education providers ensure that:

- the outcomes required for each of their qualifications are specified clearly
- achievement of those outcomes is demonstrated before a qualification is awarded
- assessment procedures that permit compensation or condonation are not applied in a way that might allow a qualification to be awarded without achievement of the full outcomes being demonstrated.

## Further information and additional references

References are given here to material which higher education providers may find useful in relation to the topic of the Chapter. They do not form part of the Quality Code, but as each Chapter is developed by an expert advisory group, the status of these materials (and others not listed) may be reconsidered, and the views of the higher education sector more broadly sought through public consultation. Additional references may also be added: this is not intended to be a comprehensive resource.

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

[www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/creditqualificationsframework/?lang=en>

Higher education credit framework for England

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Aug08.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Aug08.aspx)

Facilitating credit-based links in higher education: Guidelines to support colleges and higher education institutions

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Facilitating-credit-based-links-in-higher-education-Guidelines-to-support-colleges-and-higher-education-institutions.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Facilitating-credit-based-links-in-higher-education-Guidelines-to-support-colleges-and-higher-education-institutions.aspx)

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)  
and National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

[www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-assessments](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-assessments)

Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland

[www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Pages/Qual-boundries-guide.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Pages/Qual-boundries-guide.aspx)

Verification of the compatibility of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) with *The framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FQ-EHEA)

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Verification-of-the-compatibility-of-The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England--Wales-and-Northern-Irel.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Verification-of-the-compatibility-of-The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England--Wales-and-Northern-Irel.aspx)

The framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (FQ-EHEA)

[www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf)

European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)

[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm)

# Appendix 1: Shared Dublin descriptors for short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle awards<sup>20</sup>

The FQ-EHEA has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle, known as the 'Dublin descriptors'. These have been developed as a set and are intended to be read with reference to each other. They are primarily intended for use in the alignment of qualifications and hence national frameworks. National frameworks may themselves have additional elements or outcomes, and may have more detailed and specific functions.

The Dublin descriptors were built on the following elements:

- knowledge and understanding
- applying knowledge and understanding
- making judgements
- communications skills
- learning skills.

The Dublin descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of each Bologna cycle. They are not meant to be prescriptive; they do not represent threshold or minimum requirements and they are not exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted. The descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification. The descriptors are not subject-specific nor are they limited to academic, professional or vocational areas. For particular disciplines the descriptors should be read within the context and use of language of that discipline.

Wherever possible, they should be cross-referenced with any expectations/competencies published by the relevant community of scholars and/or practitioners. Further elaboration of the existing elements and/or introduction of new elements will be part of the evolution of them as reference points to the FQ-EHEA.

The Dublin descriptors appear below (source: <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>) and may be used by higher education providers as an additional reference point.

## **Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) are awarded to students who:**

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts

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<sup>20</sup> General secondary education also includes vocational education with a sufficiently general component.



- have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems
- can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities with peers, supervisors and clients
- have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.

**Qualifications that signify completion of the first cycle are awarded to students who:**

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional<sup>21</sup> approach to their work or vocation, and have competences<sup>22</sup> typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study
- have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues
- can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences
- have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

**Qualifications that signify completion of the second cycle are awarded to students who:**

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research<sup>23</sup> context
- can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader(or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study

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<sup>21</sup> The word **professional** is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile/specification.

<sup>22</sup> The word **competence** is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a yes/no assessment.

<sup>23</sup> The word **research** is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The word is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing, and other creative arts. It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to a traditional scientific method.

- have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements
- can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously
- have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

**Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:**

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity
- have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication
- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise
- can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

**From first cycle (eg Bachelors) to second cycle (eg Masters) to doctorates: the differences/'step changes' between the respective Dublin descriptors**

	<b>knowledge and understanding...</b>
[short cycle	...in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks]
1st cycle	[that is] supported by advanced text books [with] some aspects informed by knowledge at the forefront of their field of study...
2nd cycle	provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas...often in a research context...
Doctorates	[includes] a systematic understanding of their field of study and mastery of the methods of research associated with that field...
	<b>application of knowledge and understanding...</b>
[short cycle	often in occupational context]
1st cycle	[through] devising and sustaining arguments...
2nd cycle	[through] problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts...
Doctorates	[through the] ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity...[that has] made a contribution that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication...
	<b>ability to make judgements...</b>
[short cycle	to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems]
1st cycle	[through] gathering and interpreting relevant data...

Doctorates	[through the] ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity...[that has] made a contribution that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication...
2nd cycle	the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete data...
Doctorates	[through] critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas...
	<b>ability to communicate...</b>
[short cycle	their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients]
1st cycle	information, ideas, problems and solutions...
2nd cycle	their conclusions and the underpinning knowledge and rationale to specialist and non-specialist audiences...
Doctorates	with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise...
	<b>learning skills...</b>
[short cycle	to undertake further studies with some autonomy]
1st cycle	needed to study further with a high level of autonomy...
2nd cycle	to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous...
Doctorates	expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement...

## Appendix 2: Glossary of abbreviations

CQFW: Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales

EQF: European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning

FHEQ: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications*

FQ-EHEA: *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*

PSRBs: Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

QCA: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

SCQF: Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

## Section 2: The Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland

### Preface

The Garrick Committee's<sup>24</sup> first recommendation was to: 'Recommend to providers of higher education programmes in Scotland, the Quality Assurance Agency, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access that they should together consider and adopt an integrated qualifications framework based round level of study and Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme credit points.'

Their report further emphasised that 'the realisation of key aspects of the Committee's vision relies on the adoption by institutions of this framework, and many of our subsequent recommendations are therefore contingent upon institutions taking this forward.'

Key aspects of the qualifications framework stressed in the report included:

- a parallel framework of qualifications for the rest of the UK (paragraphs 4.12)
- a framework in which the providers of Scottish higher education can offer, and maintain, a high quality higher education system which is amongst the best in the world (paragraphs 4.4)
- a framework which includes school and further education provision... (anticipating that Vocational Qualifications will also be mapped on to the framework in due course (paragraphs 4.5))
- professional bodies and institutions...should formally consider how their requirements could be embedded within the qualifications framework (recommendation 4)
- a framework to be used by individual students to plan and map their own personal progress. By allowing for movement in different directions, the framework will represent...a network, rather than a ladder, of opportunities (paragraphs 4.9)
- qualifications should be based on outcomes and attainment, not on years of study-related to the accumulation of credits linked to levels (paragraphs 4.10).

In the Government's response to the Garrick Report<sup>25</sup> it stated that: 'the Government welcomes this recommendation and the opportunity to contribute towards its implementation. The framework will be built through agreement with those who provide, award and quality assure Scottish Qualifications. It will provide a common language for describing the qualifications system with considerable potential to promote its coherence and assist learners to progress to their full potential.'

<sup>24</sup> The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education; July 1997: *Report of the Scottish Committee*.

<sup>25</sup> *Higher Education for the 21st Century: Response to the Garrick Report*: The Scottish Office, February 1998.

## Overview

This paper has two sections. Section 1 provides details of the purpose, features and structure of *The framework for qualifications of the higher education institutions in Scotland*. Section 2 provides some guidelines on specific aspects of the framework. There is a parallel document for the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The two frameworks share many core purposes and features. In particular, they are aligned at the Honours degree, and the qualification descriptors for postgraduate awards are identical.

## Section 2.1: The framework

### The purpose of the framework

This framework for qualifications of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland has been developed as part of the wider *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)* as referred to in the Garrick Report. Within the context of the SCQF, the purposes of the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions are:

- to enable employers, schools, parents, prospective students and others to understand the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles, and how qualifications relate to one another
- to assist HEIs, learners and others to clarify potential routes for progression and credit transfer, particularly in the context of wider participation in lifelong learning
- to maintain international comparability of standards, especially in the European context, to ensure international competitiveness, and to facilitate student and graduate mobility
- to assist higher education institutions, their external examiners, and the reviewers of QAA by providing an important point of reference for setting and assessing standards.

Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications. The higher education framework in Scotland, like the SCQF as a whole, and also the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, is an outcomes-based structure that helps make explicit the nature, level and volume of outcomes. It also relates closely to other key elements of the quality assurance framework, including subject benchmark statements and programme specifications. This quality assurance framework as a whole is designed to make clear to providers, users and all stakeholders the purposes and outcomes of higher education. The higher education qualifications framework will also help professional and statutory bodies to relate their qualification structures to the wider Scottish context and so assist with the development and recognition of a range of routes to professional recognition and continuing professional development. This was a specific recommendation of the Garrick Committee (recommendation 4).

The positioning of the qualifications of the higher education institutions within the full SCQF will facilitate comparisons with other kinds of qualifications, including work-based qualifications. This will also enable the establishment of progression and credit

transfer opportunities between the full range of qualifications in Scotland, an important foundation for widening access to lifelong learning opportunities.

## Comparison of qualifications across the UK and internationally

The two parallel frameworks for higher education, one for Scotland and one for the rest of the UK, reflect the features of these different education systems whilst making clear the many similarities and alignments.

The frameworks share many common principles and components. At the postgraduate levels, the two higher education frameworks have common structures, qualification titles and qualification descriptors. Below the postgraduate levels, the Honours degree levels are considered to be in broad alignment. Below the Honours level, the frameworks reflect the particular features of the different educational structures and contexts. To reflect the similarities, the levels of the two frameworks have shared labels as follows: D (Doctorates); M (Masters); H (Honours). Below these levels, the frameworks have individual numbering systems. It is anticipated that the SCQF numbering system of levels will be increasingly widely used, supplemented where appropriate by the D, M and H labels.

Increasingly higher education institutions, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The frameworks for higher education throughout the UK are designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration, particularly in respect of the place of the Honours degree as a first cycle qualification that enables progression to the second cycle.

## Supporting flexibility and future development

The framework must be able to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises. In general, it must also recognise and facilitate diversity and innovation, and promote a wider understanding of qualifications internationally. It should be regarded as a framework, not as a straitjacket. QAA will work with the higher education institutions in Scotland to ensure that any new higher education qualifications and other relevant developments are properly accommodated and described. In conjunction with Universities Scotland, we have established a new role for the Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access (SACCA) as the body to advise QAA on the future development of the higher education section of the SCQF.

In terms of the SCQF as a whole, a partnership of Universities Scotland, QAA, the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has established a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) as the vehicle for implementing and further developing the SCQF in line with the needs of the key stakeholders in education and training in Scotland.

## Implementation timetable

A transitional period is needed to implement the framework for HEIs. In terms of qualifications awarded, the status of existing programmes cannot be altered to the possible detriment of students who have already accepted places on them. Because programmes are of differing lengths, differing periods of time will be needed before



all qualifications are awarded in accordance with the framework. Accordingly, there will be an implementation date based on the time when programmes commence. Institutions should be able to demonstrate that all students commencing programmes after that date would gain, on successful completion, qualifications that were awarded in accordance with the framework. The implementation date is the start of the academic year 2003-04.

## The framework

The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions is an outcomes-based structure based on a consistent qualification nomenclature; qualification descriptors; and credits.

These concepts are used consistently throughout the SCQF and, apart from credits, are shared also with the higher education framework for the rest of the UK. As indicated above, the framework is not intended to be and should not be used as a straitjacket. The descriptors of levels and qualifications, whilst setting out clear and meaningful reference points, are nevertheless generic descriptors. Similarly, the credit definitions of qualifications, set out below, are designed to set some minimum Expectations in terms of overall volume and level of outcome. At the same time, however, they should also support the desirable diversity in the structure of the programmes which reflect the increasingly innovative and diverse nature of higher education in Scotland.

## The nature and number of levels in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

Table 1 outlines the levels and associated principal qualifications of the SCQF as a whole.

The levels of the SCQF are broad generic levels of outcome. Each SCQF level has a descriptor, which sets out in relatively brief, generic terms the outcomes associated with each level. The levels and the descriptors are designed as a national set of reference points for use by all providers and all stakeholders and against which any learning outcomes can be located. The SCQF level descriptors are published by the Joint Advisory Committee for the SCQF. They relate to all qualifications within the SCQF and therefore refer not only to qualifications of higher education institutions but also, for example, at a single level (SCQF 7) to Advanced Highers and HNCs as well as to Certificates of Higher Education. Each qualification will be distinguished by its particular purpose and characteristic outcomes (as outlined in the qualification descriptors) and by the volume of credit required for its award. The level descriptors can, therefore, aim to provide only a general shared understanding of each level. In designing their own programmes or parts of programmes, institutions may use these generic descriptors, or they might wish to develop their own set of descriptors that reflect the particular focus of their provision. Alternatively, and where the focus is on whole qualifications, they will use the qualification descriptors as set out below.

## Defining qualifications - quantitative and qualitative descriptors of outcomes

One of the main aims of the framework is to define qualifications and how they relate to one another. In addition to a consistent use of titles, the framework provides a mechanism to describe the outcomes of qualifications in two ways: generic qualification descriptors and descriptions of the number and level of credits. These two descriptions are designed to be complementary and mutually reinforcing statements of the nature and outcomes of qualifications.

**Table 1: Levels and associated qualifications of higher education institutions and the main qualifications of other awarding bodies within the SCQF**

National qualifications (units, courses and group awards)

Higher National qualifications

Qualifications awarded by higher education institutions in Scotland SVQs<sup>26</sup>

SCQF level (SHE = Scottish higher education level)	National qualifications (units, courses and group awards)	Higher National qualifications	Qualifications awarded by higher education institutions in Scotland	SVQs
12 (SHE D) <sup>27</sup>			Doctorates	
11 (SHE M)			Masters/ Postgraduate Diploma and Certificate	SVQ 5
10 (SHE H)			Honours degree	
9 (SHE 3)			Degree	
8 (SHE 2)		Higher National Diploma of Higher Diploma	Diploma of Higher Education	SVQ 4
7 (SHE 1)	Advanced Higher	Higher National Certificate	Certificate of Higher Certificate	
6	Higher			SVQ 3
5	Intermediate 2/ Credit Standard Grade			SVQ 2
4	Intermediate 1/ General Standard Grade			SVQ 1

<sup>26</sup> Labels H, M and D refer to Honours, Masters, and Doctoral and are used consistently across the UK.

<sup>27</sup> Provisional: work is continuing to refine the placing of SVQs within the SCQF.

SCQF level (SHE = Scottish higher education level)	National qualifications (units, courses and group awards)	Higher National qualifications	Qualifications awarded by higher education institutions in Scotland	SVQs
3	Access 3/ Foundation Standard Grade			
2	Access 2			
1	Access 1			

### Qualification descriptors

Qualification descriptors make explicit general expectations of the purpose and outcomes of the main qualifications at each level, and make clear how these differ from other qualifications, both at that level and at other levels. Qualification descriptors are in three parts. The first part is a general description of the qualification. The second is a statement of general outcomes, achievement of which students should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part will be of particular interest to those designing, approving and reviewing academic programmes. The third part is a statement of the wider abilities that the typical student could be expected to have developed. It will be of assistance to employers and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of the qualification. In addition to level descriptors, the qualification descriptors also provide a point of reference that can help HEIs determine at which point in the framework individual short courses might be placed. QAA will keep under review the need for any additional qualification descriptors in the light of future developments.

### The relationship of the framework to other points of reference for academic standards

Qualification descriptors are generic statements of the outcomes of study. Further guidance on the expectations for degrees in particular subjects can be found in subject benchmark statements. These have been produced for the Honours level, and will be produced for other levels where there is significant taught provision in a subject. In areas where there is no benchmark statement, or where more than one such statement may be relevant, the statements of generic outcomes contained in the qualification descriptors provide a particularly important point of reference. Many academic programmes aim to develop general and specific skills. These are not addressed in the qualification descriptors, as many skills, and the extent to which they need to be developed, are discipline or profession-specific. As such, they are addressed more appropriately in subject benchmark statements and individual programme specifications.

## Credit

Levels, level descriptors and qualification descriptors provide reference points for locating the 'level' of any group of outcomes (a qualification, a module or other programme element). Credit points provide the associated measure for describing the volume of outcomes. The definition of the credit point remains unchanged from the SCOTCAT framework and is now shared by the whole of the SCQF: one credit point represents the learning outcomes expected to be achieved by the average learner at the relevant level in 10 hours of total learner effort. It is important to note that credit is a measure of outcome, not of study time.

SCQF credit points allow the volume of outcomes of all qualifications, modules or other programme elements to be described. The credit definitions of the main qualifications of HEIs are set out in table 2.

These definitions specify the minimum total number of credits for each qualification together with the minimum number required at the exit level. The Honours degree credit definition refers to the minimum amount of credit at both the Honours level and SHE 3 to reflect the breadth and depth of the Honours degree in Scotland.

Together, the credit definitions and the qualification descriptors set out generic Expectations in terms of the nature and volume of outcomes of qualifications and will be of particular interest to those designing and approving academic programmes. They will need to be satisfied that, for any programme, the curriculum and assessment arrangements provide all students with the opportunity to achieve, and to demonstrate achievement of, the outcomes. In Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, academic review processes will focus on the qualification descriptors (as opposed to credit definitions). Within the minimum credit definitions, institutions will continue to structure programmes in whatever ways are appropriate to the achievement of the aims of the qualifications, the teaching and learning strategy, and the characteristics of the associated learner groups. The SCQF is designed to support lifelong learning by enabling, where appropriate, the transfer of credit between programmes and between institutions. There is no intention, however, that the framework should do other than facilitate this process. It is not a mandatory process, and individual institutions remain solely responsible for all matters of credit recognition towards their awards.

**Table 2: Credit definitions of the main qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland**

Level	Typical HEI qualifications and their credit definitions	
<b>SHE D</b> (SCQF 12)	PhD/DPhil Not credit rated <sup>28</sup>	Other Doctorates <i>Min 540 with min 420 at SHE D</i>
<b>SHE M</b> (SCQF 11)	MPhil	<i>Either not credit rated<sup>28</sup> or min 300 with min 270 at SHE M</i>
	Masters	<i>Min 180 with min 150 at SHE M</i>
	Masters (following an integrated programme from undergraduate to Masters level study)	<i>Min 600 with min 120 at SHE M</i>
	Postgraduate Diploma	<i>Min 120 with min 90 at SHE M</i>
	Postgraduate Certificate	<i>Min 60 with min 40 at SHE M</i>
<b>SHE H</b> (SCQF 10)	Scottish Bachelors degree with Honours <sup>29</sup> <i>Min 480 with min of 180 at SHE 3 and SHE H of which a minimum of 90 at SHE H</i>	Qualifications that are typically for graduates or equivalent but are not of postgraduate level of outcome
<b>SHE 3</b> (SCQF 9)	Scottish Bachelors degree <i>Min 360 with min 60 at SHE 3<sup>30</sup></i>	Graduate Diploma <i>Min of 120 at min of SHE 3</i>  Graduate Certificate <i>Min of 60 at min of SHE 3</i>
<b>SHE 2</b> (SCQF 8)	Diploma of HE <i>Min 240 with min 90 at SHE 2</i>	
<b>SHE 1</b> (SCQF 7)	Certificate of HE <i>Min 120 with min 90 at SHE 1</i>	

<sup>28</sup> Programmes of work that are assessed solely by a final thesis, or by published work, artefact or performance that is accompanied by a written commentary placing it within its academic context need not be credit rated.

<sup>29</sup> A small number of universities have a tradition of awarding 'MA' as opposed to 'BA' in this category.

<sup>30</sup> The recommendation for a minimum of 60 credits at level 3 reflects the need to encompass both breadth and depth within the definition. Where there is a clear subject or professional focus to the degree, this minimum requirement may well be exceeded in line with particular professional body or other requirements.

## Levels, credits and programme design

The qualifications framework has been designed to bring consistency and a common language within which institutions will describe the particular features and purposes of their individual programmes and qualifications. The framework also provides a tool for assisting programme design.

There is no expectation, however, that other than the minimum set out in table 2, any programme has to follow a set pattern of a specified number of credits at each level. It is for the institution and programme designers to determine the most appropriate structure and progression towards the final outcomes and the award of the qualification. In particular, there is no expectation that, for example, level 1 credits are always required to be taken in, and only in, year one. Many programmes offer learners some choice of levels within each year of study. In general, it is important to emphasise that it is not the purpose of the framework to prescribe the internal organisation of academic programmes.

## Assessment

Effective and appropriate assessment is essential to the operation of an outcomes-based qualifications framework. It is the assessment of the outcomes of learning that is important, rather than the nature of any component element of study. For example, a student may, in an appropriate learning environment, build on introductory material and be assessed against outcomes of a qualification at a level above that associated with the introductory material alone.

See *Chapter B6: Assessment of the students and accreditation of prior learning* of the Quality Code, especially Indicator 11 dealing with compensation and condonation; and *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code, especially the introduction dealing with general principles.

## Use of the framework in institutional review<sup>31</sup>

The framework will provide reference points that may be used to determine whether the intended outcomes for programmes, and actual student achievement, are appropriate to the level of the qualification awarded. Reviewers will also assess whether curriculum design is effective in achieving intended programme outcomes. In this context, institutions should be able to demonstrate that the volume and nature of learning is adequate to achieve the outcomes indicated by the framework. Claims that those outcomes can be achieved from volumes of learning that are significantly below those found necessary by institutions generally are likely to be tested by reviewers with particular thoroughness. The above statement applies throughout the UK. In this context, the key feature of the frameworks will be the qualification descriptors rather than particular credit ratings.

## Section 2.2: Specific guidelines

The guidelines take the form of a series of precepts and accompanying outline guidance. The precepts identify key matters that an institution should be able to

<sup>31</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/Pages/Enhancement-led-institutional-review.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/Pages/Enhancement-led-institutional-review.aspx)

demonstrate that it is addressing effectively through its own quality assurance mechanisms. The accompanying outline guidance is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but for many institutions it will constitute appropriate good practice.

### Awarding qualifications

**Qualifications should be awarded to mark the achievement of positively defined outcomes, not as compensation for failure at a higher level, or by default.**

Failure at a higher level does not mean that a lower qualification cannot be awarded. However, where a student does not demonstrate the outcomes set out in a qualification descriptor, a lower qualification should only be awarded if the student has demonstrated the outcomes required for that qualification.

Institutions should ensure that:

- the outcomes required for each of their qualifications are specified clearly
- achievement of those outcomes is demonstrated before a qualification is awarded
- assessment procedures that permit compensation or condonation are not applied in a way that might allow a qualification to be awarded without achievement of the full outcomes being demonstrated.

### Positioning qualifications within the framework

**Institutions should be able to demonstrate that each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the framework.**

In considering the appropriate level for a qualification, institutions should consider:

- the relationship between the intended outcomes of the programme and the expectations set out in qualification descriptors
- whether there is a sufficient volume of assessed study that will demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved
- whether the design of the curriculum and assessments is such that all students following the programme have the opportunity to achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes.

### Naming qualifications

**Institutions should ensure that the name given to any qualification represents appropriately the level of achievement, reflects accurately the field(s) of study, and is not misleading.**

In naming qualifications, institutions should:

- use the title 'degree' only for a qualification that meets the Expectations of a qualification descriptor and credit definition at SHE levels 3, H, M or D
- use the titles 'Honours', 'Masters' and 'Doctor' only for qualifications that meet the expectations of the qualification descriptors and credit definitions at SHE levels H, M and D respectively<sup>32</sup>
- have regard for the more detailed guidance in Appendix 4 on qualification nomenclature.

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<sup>32</sup> See footnote to Appendix 4.

## Further information and additional references

References are given here to material which higher education providers may find useful in relation to the topic of the chapter. They do not form part of the Quality Code, but as each Chapter is developed by an expert advisory group, the status of these materials (and others not listed) may be reconsidered, and the views of the higher education sector more broadly sought through public consultation. Additional references may also be added: this is not intended to be a comprehensive resource.

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)  
[www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)  
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/qualificationsinwales/creditqualificationsframework/?lang=en>

Higher education credit framework for England  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Aug08.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Aug08.aspx)

Facilitating credit-based links in higher education: Guidelines to support colleges and higher education institutions  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Facilitating-credit-based-links-in-higher-education-Guidelines-to-support-colleges-and-higher-education-institutions.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Facilitating-credit-based-links-in-higher-education-Guidelines-to-support-colleges-and-higher-education-institutions.aspx)

Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and National Qualifications Framework (NQF)  
[www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-assessments](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-assessments)

Qualifications can cross boundaries - a rough guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Pages/Qual-boundries-guide.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Pages/Qual-boundries-guide.aspx)

Verification of the compatibility of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) with *The framework for Qualifications of the European higher education area* (FQ-EHEA)  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Verification-of-the-compatibility-of-The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England--Wales-and-Northern-Irel.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Verification-of-the-compatibility-of-The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England--Wales-and-Northern-Irel.aspx)

*The framework for qualifications of the European higher education area* (FQ-EHEA)  
[www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf)

European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm)



## Appendix 3: Qualification descriptors

The breadth and detail of the outcomes offered by any one qualification will reflect the particular purpose and focus of the programme and will be set out in the programme specification. Reflecting the traditional breadth of Scottish higher education, many programmes offer breadth through coverage of several subject areas. Other programmes will focus on one or perhaps two subjects or professional areas. Clearly, in the former case the range of knowledge in respect of any one subject will be less than where one or two subjects are being pursued more exclusively. The qualification descriptors attempt to span this diversity. The qualification descriptors for postgraduate qualifications are the same across the UK.

### The Certificate of Higher Education

**SHE level:** 1 ( SCQF level 7)

**Credit definition:** At least 120 credits of which a minimum of 90 are at SHE level 1 or higher.

#### General

The Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) is available in a number of Scottish higher education institutions typically as an exit award after the equivalent of one year of full-time study. Some CertHEs are awarded for achievement over a breadth of subject areas while others focus on one subject, in some cases with a strong vocational focus. The precise focus and outcomes will be identified in the relevant programme specifications.

#### Characteristic outcomes of Certificates of Higher Education

- i An outline knowledge of the scope and main areas of the subject(s) and its links with related subjects and a more extensive knowledge of some of the key areas.
- ii An understanding of the major theories, principles and concepts.
- iii Familiarity with some of the routine materials, techniques and practices of the subject.
- iv Skills for the gathering, basic analysis, and presentation of routine information, ideas, concepts and quantitative and qualitative data within a clearly defined context.

This will include the use of information and communications technology (ICT) as appropriate to the subject.

#### Typically, holders of the Certificate of Higher Education will be able to:

- a) use their knowledge of the subject and its techniques in a routine manner to evaluate and formulate a range of arguments and solutions to problems and issues of a routine nature
- b) communicate the results of their study and other work accurately and reliably and within structured and coherent arguments
- c) undertake further learning within a structured and managed environment
- d) apply their subject-related and transferable skills in contexts where individuals may have some limited personal responsibility, but the criteria for decisions and the scope of the task are well defined.

## The Diploma of Higher Education

**SHE level:** 2 (SCQF level 8)

**Credit definition:** At least 240 credits of which a minimum of 90 are at SHE level 2 or higher.

### General

The Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) is typically offered after the equivalent of the first two years of full-time higher education in Scotland. Some DipHEs are awarded for achievement over a breadth of subject areas while others focus on one subject, in some cases with a strong vocational focus. The precise focus and outcomes will be identified in the relevant programme specifications.

### Characteristic outcomes of the Diploma of Higher Education

- i A knowledge and understanding of the scope and main areas of the subject(s) and its interactions with related subjects. Detailed knowledge of some key areas which may include some knowledge of current issues in limited specialised areas.
- ii Familiarity and understanding of a range of the essential theories, principles and concepts and an awareness of major issues at the forefront of the subject(s).
- iii Familiarity and effective deployment of essential/routine materials, techniques and practices of the subject(s).
- iv Skills for the gathering, critical analysis and presentation of information, ideas, concepts and/or quantitative and qualitative data that is core to the subject(s). This will include the use of ICT as appropriate to the subject(s).

### Typically, holders of the Diploma of Higher Education will be able to:

- a) use their knowledge, understanding and skills to critically evaluate and formulate evidence-based arguments and identify solutions to clearly defined problems of a generally routine nature
- b) communicate the results of their study and other work accurately and reliably using a range of specialist techniques
- c) identify and address their own major learning needs within defined contexts and undertake guided further learning in new areas
- d) apply their subject-related and transferable skills in contexts where the scope of the task and the criteria for decisions are generally well defined but where some personal responsibility and initiative is required.

## The Scottish Bachelors degree

**SHE level:** 3 (SCQF 9)

**Credit definition:** At least 360 credits of which a minimum of 60 are at SHE level 3.

### General

The Scottish Bachelors (non-Honours) degree is typically achieved after the equivalent of three years of full-time higher education. In the main, and depending on the subjects or professional area(s) studied, it is awarded either a Bachelor of Science (BSc), or a Bachelor of Arts (BA). Although all degrees will exhibit a balance of breadth and depth, some degrees will be highly focused while others will develop greater breadth of outcomes. The particular characteristics of each degree will be articulated in the programme specification.

Many degrees which have a specific vocational focus carry recognition by the appropriate professional or statutory body. In a small number of universities, in some faculties, this qualification is titled 'MA' (see footnote to Appendix 4). The Scottish Bachelors degree is a recognised 'normal' entry requirement to a number of professions across the UK.

#### **Characteristic outcomes of the degree**

- i A broad and comparative knowledge of the general scope of the subject, its different areas and applications, and its interactions with related subjects. A detailed knowledge of a defined subject or a more limited coverage of a specialist area balanced by a wider range of study. In each case, specialised study will be informed by current developments in the subject.
- ii A critical understanding of the essential theories, principles and concepts of the subject(s) and of the ways in which these are developed through the main methods of enquiry in the subject. An awareness of the provisional nature of knowledge.
- iii Familiarity and competence in the use of routine materials, practices and skills and of a few that are more specialised, advanced and complex.
- iv Well developed skills for the gathering, evaluation, analysis and presentation of information, ideas, concepts and quantitative and/or qualitative data, drawing on a wide range of current sources. This will include the use of ICT as appropriate to the subject(s).

#### **Typically, holders of the degree will be able to:**

- a) use their knowledge, understanding and skills, in both identifying and analysing problems and issues and in formulating, evaluating and applying evidence-based solutions and arguments
- b) communicate the results of their studies and other work accurately and reliably in a range of different contexts using the main specialist concepts, constructs and techniques of the subject(s)
- c) identify and address their own learning needs including being able to draw on a range of current research, development and professional materials
- d) apply their subject and transferable skills to contexts where criteria for decisions and the scope of the task may be well defined but where personal responsibility, initiative and decision-making is also required.

#### **The Scottish Bachelors degree with Honours**

**SHE level:** H (SCQF 10)

**Credit definition:** At least 480 credits of which a minimum of 180 are at SHE levels 3 and H including a minimum of 90 at SHE level H.

#### **General**

The Scottish Bachelors degree with Honours is typically offered through the equivalent of four years of full-time higher education. It is awarded mainly as either a Bachelor of Science (BSc Hons), or a Bachelor of Arts (BA Hons). All Honours degrees will exhibit a balance of breadth and depth as will be clear from particular programme specifications. Many Honours degrees will have a specific vocational focus, and in some cases will carry recognition by the appropriate professional or statutory body. In

a small number of universities, in some faculties, this qualification is titled 'MA (Hons)' (see footnote to Appendix 4). The Honours degree is the recognised 'normal' entry requirement to postgraduate study and to many professions across the UK.

**Characteristic outcomes of the degree with Honours**

- i A systematic, extensive and comparative knowledge and understanding of the subject(s) as a whole and its links to related subject(s). A detailed knowledge of a few specialisms and developments, some of which are at, or informed by, the forefront of the subject.
- ii A critical understanding of the established theories, principles and concepts, and of a number of advanced and emerging issues at the forefront of the subject(s).
- iii A critical understanding of the uncertainty and limits of knowledge and how it is developed and an ability to deploy established techniques of analysis and enquiry within the subject.
- iv A comprehensive knowledge and familiarity with essential and advanced materials, techniques and skills including some at the forefront of the subject.
- v Skills in identifying information needs, and in the systematic gathering, analysis and interpretation of ideas, concepts and qualitative and quantitative data and information from a range of evaluated sources including current research, scholarly, and/or professional literature.

**Typically, holders of the degree with Honours will be able to:**

- a) use their knowledge, understanding and skills in the systematic and critical assessment of a wide range of concepts, ideas, and data (that may be incomplete), and in both identifying and analysing complex problems and issues; demonstrating some originality and creativity in formulating, evaluating and applying evidence-based solutions and arguments
- b) communicate the results of their study and other work accurately and reliably using the full repertoire of the principle concepts and constructs of the subject(s)
- c) systematically identify and address their own learning needs both in current and in new areas, making use of research, development and professional materials as appropriate, including those related to the forefront of developments
- d) apply their subject-related and transferable skills in contexts of a professional or equivalent nature where there is a requirement for:
  - the exercise of personal responsibility and initiative
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
  - the ability to undertake further developments of a professional or equivalent nature.

**Master's degrees**

**SHE level:** M (SCQF level 11)

**Credit definition:** At least 180 credits of which a minimum of 150 are at SHE level M. For integrated Masters, at least 600 credits of which a minimum of 120 are at SHE level M. (Credit definitions do not normally apply to the MPhil - see table 2 above).

### **General**

The Master's degree is available through several different routes: as a programme for graduates or equivalent through at least one year of full-time postgraduate study or an equivalent period of part-time study; or as a programme of typically the equivalent of five years' full-time study that integrates a period of undergraduate study with the Masters degree.

The first of these typically leads to award of Master of Science or Master of Arts, depending on the subject taken, but other titles are also used. Integrated programmes, frequently offered over the equivalent of five years' full-time study, typically lead to a subject-specific qualification title (eg MEng) and are often linked to professional/statutory body recognition.

In the majority of cases, the Masters degree reflects a specialised knowledge and understanding of particular areas, applications or levels of expertise in particular subject or professional areas. In some professional areas, Masters degrees are linked to structures of continuing professional development.

### **Characteristic outcomes of Masters degrees**

- i A systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice.
- ii A comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.
- iii Originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline.
- iv Conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; and
  - to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate,
  - to propose new hypotheses.

### **Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:**

- a) deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- b) demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level
- c) continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and develop new skills to a high level;

and will have:

- d) the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
  - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
  - decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations; and
  - the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

### **Doctoral degrees**

**SHE level:** D (SCQF level 12)

**Credit definition:** At least 540 credits of which a minimum of 420 are at SHE level D  
Credit definitions do not apply to research-based Doctorates.

#### **General**

The Doctoral degrees are available through several different routes. The PhD is normally awarded following successful completion of a thesis which requires the equivalent of a minimum of three years' full-time research and study to complete. Professional doctorates also require the equivalent of three years' full-time research and study to complete and will frequently involve work-based as well as HEI-based research and study. Doctoral degrees reflect specialised, advanced knowledge, understanding and practice at the frontiers of the subject or professional area.

#### **Characteristic outcomes of Doctoral degrees**

- i The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication.
- ii A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice.
- iii The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems.
- iv A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

#### **Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:**

- a) make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- b) continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches

and will have:

- c) the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

## Appendix 4: Qualification nomenclature

Public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications requires a consistent use of qualification titles. The following guidelines are designed to assist institutions in achieving consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, nature and subjects of study.

### Level

- The titles 'Honours', 'Master' and 'Doctor' should be used only for qualifications that meet the expectations of the qualification descriptors and credit definitions at SHE levels H, M, and D respectively.<sup>33</sup>
- Titles with the stem 'Postgraduate' (eg Postgraduate Diploma) should be restricted to qualifications which meet the expectations of the framework, and in particular relevant parts of the descriptors for qualifications at SHE level M or above.
- Titles with the stem 'Graduate' (eg Graduate Diploma) may be used for qualifications from programmes of study that typically require graduate entry or its equivalent, and which meet the expectations of the framework, and in particular relevant parts of the descriptors for qualifications at SHE level 3 or H.

### Nature

- The title 'degree' should be used only for qualifications that meet the expectations of the qualification descriptor and credit definitions at SHE levels 3, H, M or D.
- Use of the abbreviated titles 'PhD' and 'DPhil' should be restricted to qualifications where assessment is solely by a final thesis or published work; or by artefact or performance that is accompanied by a written commentary placing it in its academic context.
- The abbreviated title 'MPhil' should normally be reserved for qualifications awarded following extended Masters courses that typically involve a substantial element of research or equivalent enquiry.
- When used with the stems 'Graduate' or 'Postgraduate', the title 'Certificate' should normally signify at least 60 credits and the title 'Diploma' should normally signify at least 120 credits.

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<sup>33</sup> A small number of universities in Scotland have a long tradition of labelling certain first degrees as 'MA'. Reports of Agency reviews of such provision will relate to undergraduate benchmarks and will make it clear that the title reflects Scottish custom and practice, and that any positive judgement on standards should not be taken as implying that the outcomes of the programme were at postgraduate level.

## Subject

- Titles used for doctoral qualifications awarded after programmes that include a substantial taught element should normally include the name of the discipline in the title (eg EdD for Doctor of Education).
- Qualification titles that reflect the subject focus of programmes of study in two disciplines (eg a joint Honours award) should consider nomenclatures based on:
  - A and B, where there is an approximately equal balance between two components
  - A with B, for a major/minor combination where the minor subject accounts for at least a quarter of the programme.
- Qualification titles should not normally reflect more than three subject components.
- Where there are more than three significant components, the title 'Combined Studies' would be appropriate.



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