

# UK Quality Code for Higher Education

## Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards

The Frameworks for  
Higher Education Qualifications  
of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies

October 2014

PART  
A

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# List of abbreviations and terms used

Credit	Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level.
Cycles	Sequential levels identified by the Bologna process (short cycle within the first cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) within which all European higher education qualifications are located.
CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
EQF	European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
Degree-awarding bodies	A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).
Exit qualification	A qualification which may be awarded on completion of an intermediate point of studies in a longer programme of study (when a student leaves the programme) but for which the student has not registered at the outset.
FHEQ	The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
FQHEIS	The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland
Framework levels	A series of sequential stages (a developmental continuum) expressed in terms of a range of generic outcomes against which typical qualifications can be positioned.
Intermediate qualification	A separate qualification which can be awarded at a specific stage or level part of the way through a longer programme of study and for which a student can register at the outset of study.
Level descriptors	A statement of the generic characteristics of outcomes of learning at a specific level of a qualifications framework, used as a reference point.
Qualification	A degree, diploma or certificate awarded by a competent authority (in this context a degree-awarding body) in recognition that particular programme or qualification outcomes have been achieved following the successful completion of a recognised higher education programme of study.
Qualification descriptor	Generic statements of the outcomes of study associated with a specific qualification. They provide clear points of reference that describe the main outcomes of a qualification.
Programme (of study)	An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification. This includes research programmes.

Programme learning outcomes	Statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a designated programme of study (which leads to a qualification). These are statements of holistic outcomes and not simply the sum of the parts (the learning outcomes of individual modules).
PSRBs	Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
QF-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
Reference points	Reference points are collectively agreed requirements or points of comparison (at international, national and degree-awarding body level) which are used by degree-awarding bodies to ensure consistency in academic standards.
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
Threshold academic standards	The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. For equivalent qualifications, the threshold level of achievement is agreed across the UK and is described by the qualification descriptors set out in the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications.

# About the Quality Code

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) is the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers.<sup>1</sup> It makes clear what higher education providers are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of them. The Quality Code covers all four nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and all providers of UK higher education operating internationally. It protects the interests of all students, regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate students.

The Quality Code has three Parts. Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards contains three Chapters and seven Expectations. Each of the 11 Chapters of Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality, and Part C: Information about Higher Education provision contain a single Expectation. An Expectation expresses the key principle that the higher education community has identified as essential for the assurance of academic standards and quality within the area covered by the respective Chapter or Part. Higher education providers reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) are required to meet all the Expectations. The manner in which they do so is their own responsibility. QAA carries out reviews to check whether higher education providers are meeting the Expectations.<sup>2</sup>

The Expectations in Part C and each Chapter of Part B are accompanied by a series of Indicators that reflect sound practice, and through which providers can demonstrate they are meeting the relevant Expectation. Indicators are not designed to be used as a checklist; they are intended to help providers reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices to demonstrate that the Expectations in the Quality Code are being met. Each Indicator is numbered and printed in bold and is supported by an explanatory note that gives more information about it, together with examples of how the Indicator may be interpreted in practice. Indicators are grouped into clusters under a heading. There are no Indicators in Part A. Explanatory text supports each of the Expectations.

Each Part and Chapter has been developed by QAA through an extensive process of consultation with higher education providers; their representative bodies; the National Union of Students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; and other interested parties.

Higher education providers are also responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Part or Chapter where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources.

*The UK Quality Code for Higher Education: General Introduction*<sup>3</sup> should be considered in conjunction with this document. It provides a technical introduction for users, including guidance concerning the terminology used and a quick-reference glossary.

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1 [www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode)

2 [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education)

3 [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=181#.VE9lXHhFBaQ](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=181#.VE9lXHhFBaQ)

# About Part A

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

Part A of the Quality Code explains how academic standards are set and maintained for higher education qualifications in the UK. The national qualification frameworks, credit arrangements, subject benchmark statements and guidance on qualification characteristics are all formal components of Part A and form the basis for national threshold academic standards. Part A explains how these components relate to each other. It describes how collectively they provide an integrated context for setting and maintaining academic standards in higher education and are used as tools in this process. Part A sets out what is expected of degree-awarding bodies in setting, delivering and maintaining the academic standards of the qualifications they award. Delivery organisations, working with degree-awarding bodies do not carry the same responsibilities for academic standards but need to understand how academic standards are set and maintained in UK higher education. The specific role as a delivery organisation in relation to academic standards is set out in the formal agreement with its degree-awarding body. See further *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision With Others*.

Part A comprises three Chapters which deal with UK and European reference points (*Chapter A1*), degree-awarding bodies' reference points for academic standards (*Chapter A2*) and securing academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to academic awards (*Chapter A3*).

*Chapter A1* now formally incorporates, and places in an explanatory context, the following QAA publications as constituent components of this Part of the Quality Code:

- the national frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies (*The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* which applies to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* which applies in Scotland) that set out the different qualification levels and national expectations of standards of achievement
- guidance on qualification characteristics
- the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*
- *The Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Guidance on Academic Credit Arrangements in Higher Education in England*
- Subject Benchmark Statements which set out the nature and characteristics of degrees (generally bachelor's with honours) and the outcomes graduates are expected to achieve in specific subject areas.

Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality sets out in detail the processes in which all higher education providers engage in order to set, deliver and maintain academic standards, and to assure and enhance the quality of learning opportunities. The third Chapter of Part A therefore refers to specific Chapters in Part B for more detailed information on the processes of programme approval and review, assessment and the use of external expertise.

Part A was subject to public consultation during June and July 2013 and was published in October 2013. It became a reference point for the purposes of reviews carried out by QAA from August 2014.

# About the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies

National qualification frameworks are formal structures which are adopted by countries to define their qualification systems. Generally they identify a hierarchy of qualification levels in ascending order and state the generic requirements for qualifications to be awarded at each of these levels. The frameworks show what qualifications are at the same level and indicate how one qualification may lead to another either at the same or a higher level. They describe a continuum of learning which allows any new qualifications to be placed within the educational system. Assigning levels to qualifications promotes the accurate and consistent description and marketing of qualifications by those who award them. National qualification frameworks provide a context for the articulation, review and development of qualifications. They are a tool both for securing threshold academic standards nationally and for making valid comparisons of qualifications internationally (thus facilitating student mobility).

Within the UK, responsibility for education is delegated to each of the four jurisdictions. There are differences between the four countries in the educational systems in place, the qualifications offered, and how these are regulated. The differences are most pronounced in general and secondary education. As a result there are a number of different qualifications and credit frameworks (see paragraph 2.25).

There are two parallel frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies, one that applies to Scotland and one that operates in the rest of the UK:

- *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*
- *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS).*

These frameworks are the principal national reference points<sup>4</sup> for academic standards in UK higher education and are formal components of the Quality Code, Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards (see *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards*).

Each framework sets out a hierarchy of qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification type at each of the levels. UK degree-awarding bodies are required to use the relevant frameworks in setting and maintaining academic standards. When awarding qualifications, they are expected to ensure that the requirements of the frameworks are met.

The frameworks are an important tool for professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in defining and using qualifications in the context of their professional recognition and accreditation processes. The frameworks also inform international comparability of academic standards, especially in the European context; support international competitiveness; and facilitate student and graduate mobility.

The two frameworks were first published in 2001. The FHEQ was revised in 2008 and the FQHEIS in 2014. All qualifications awarded for programmes commencing in or after 2003 are expected to be in accordance with the relevant framework for higher education qualifications.

The present document was subject to public consultation during May and June 2014 and was published in November 2014. It becomes a reference point for the purposes of reviews carried out by QAA from August 2015.

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<sup>4</sup> Reference points are collectively agreed requirements or points of comparison (at international, national and degree-awarding body level) which are used by degree-awarding bodies to ensure consistency in academic standards.

Section 1 of this document explains the nature of the document and describes who is expected to use it. Section 2 describes the main features of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications. Section 3 explains the framework levels and provides a table setting these out together with the main qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies at each level. Section 4 sets out the qualification descriptors. Sections 5 and 6 set out how the qualification descriptors are used and how the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are expected to be implemented.

## External links

Higher education providers are responsible for ascertaining which laws and regulations apply to them. Higher education providers may wish to consider the indicative lists of further guidelines, references and resources. QAA takes no responsibility for the content of external websites.

# The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies

## 1 Introduction

1.1 This document should be read in conjunction with Part A of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code).<sup>5</sup> It is a technical manual aimed at academic and professional staff working in higher education. It is intended to be used in support of their professional responsibilities for:

- establishing degree-awarding bodies' own academic frameworks and regulations by which they govern how they award qualifications (see Quality Code, *Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards*).
- setting and maintaining academic standards (see Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*) both within their own organisations and when acting as external examiners
- formal referencing of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications to European or other international qualifications frameworks.

1.2 Readers and stakeholders seeking an introduction to the topic may find it more useful to read *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards* of the Quality Code which explains the role of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications<sup>6</sup> in more general terms.

## 2 Main features of the frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies

### The status and remit

2.1 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications apply to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic qualifications,<sup>7</sup> other than higher doctorates, granted by degree-awarding bodies<sup>8</sup> in the exercise of their degree awarding powers (see the introduction to Part A of the Quality Code). The frameworks apply to all qualifications awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies irrespective of where the educational provision is delivered or what organisation provides it (see Quality Code *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*). They do not apply to honorary degrees or other honorary awards (which are not academic qualifications).

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<sup>5</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a)

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the text of this document, the term 'UK frameworks for higher education qualifications' is used as shorthand to refer to *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*.

<sup>7</sup> The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications apply to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies at level 4 and above in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and at level 7 and above on the SCQF. Free-standing foundation provision (at level 3/level 6) which is not integrated with a degree programme is not regarded as higher education and is not covered by the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications.

<sup>8</sup> A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

2.2 UK degree-awarding bodies award their own qualifications; these are not awarded by the state. This autonomy means that degree-awarding bodies are responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards and quality of their qualifications.

2.3 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are the product of extensive stakeholder consultation and consensus building.<sup>9</sup> They are maintained, reviewed and developed by QAA. They have neither a statutory basis nor a regulatory function. All degree-awarding bodies are required to demonstrate that their qualifications are awarded in accordance with the relevant framework for any programmes that started after 2003. Neither the FHEQ nor the FQHEIS functions as a register of qualifications.<sup>10</sup>

2.4 The power to award degrees is regulated by law in the UK. Those organisations granted the power to award higher education degrees are referred to as Recognised Bodies and a full list of these is published by the UK Government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). It is an offence for an organisation to purport to award, or to offer a UK degree, unless it is authorised to do so. Degree-awarding bodies often work with other providers that do not have degree awarding powers to deliver provision which leads to a qualification of the degree-awarding body. The Listed Bodies Order (also maintained by BIS) lists providers that do not have the powers to award their own degrees, but provide programmes that lead to a degree of a Recognised Body. See the introduction to Part A Quality Code.

2.5 Education providers are entitled to claim that their qualifications are assigned to a level of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications only if those qualifications are awarded by a degree-awarding body that subscribes to QAA and whose academic standards and quality are assured by QAA.

2.6 There are two parallel frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies, one for Scotland and one for the rest of the UK. *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS). These two UK frameworks share core purposes while reflecting the features of the different education systems.

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### **Further guidelines, references and resources**

Degree-awarding powers and university title: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/daput)

BIS: Recognised UK degrees: [www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees](http://www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees)

BIS: Listed Bodies: [www.gov.uk/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised/listed-bodies](http://www.gov.uk/check-a-university-is-officially-recognised/listed-bodies)

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<sup>9</sup> They were developed by QAA in consultation with the higher education sector following recommendations by National Committees of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997.

<sup>10</sup> The SCQF has a database of qualifications which includes the qualifications of degree-awarding bodies in Scotland: [scqf.org.uk/the-framework/search-database/](http://scqf.org.uk/the-framework/search-database/)

## The purposes

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

2.8 The main purposes of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are to:

- provide the principal national points of reference for higher education providers and their external examiners when setting and assessing academic standards
- promote a shared understanding of the demands and outcomes associated with typical qualifications by demanding a consistent use of qualification titles across the higher education sector
- assist in the identification of potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning.

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

## The approach

2.9 The fundamental premise of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications is that qualifications are awarded on the basis of demonstrated achievement of outcomes (expressed in terms of knowledge, understanding and abilities) and attainment rather than years of study. This is known as an outcomes-based approach to qualifications.

2.10 Qualification descriptors are key to this premise. A qualification descriptor sets out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of a particular type of qualification (for example a bachelor's degree with honours). The qualification descriptors contained in the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications describe the threshold academic standard for those qualification types in terms of the levels of knowledge and understanding and the types of abilities that holders of the relevant qualification are expected to have.

2.11 The outcomes and attributes described in qualification descriptors result from learning acquired on completion of coherent programmes of study. These programmes, which develop high-level analytical skills and a broad range of competences, are therefore distinct from training or solely the acquisition of higher-level skills. Individual programmes of study have programme learning outcomes which specify the intended outcomes from that programme which must be achieved for the award of a specific qualification from an individual degree-awarding body. The programme learning outcomes are required to align with the relevant qualification descriptor.

2.12 Each of the two UK frameworks for higher education qualifications has a number of different stages known as framework levels. These reflect distinct levels of intellectual achievement. Each level generally comprises a band of qualifications that share similar levels of attainment. Framework levels facilitate understanding of how higher education qualifications at different levels within a particular framework relate to each other. They also assist in comparison of different types of qualifications at the same level within a particular framework level or in comparison of qualifications at a similar level in different frameworks (such as the Qualifications and Credit Framework) (see paragraph 2.25).

2.13 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are also based on the principle that consistent qualification nomenclature for the main qualification types (for example degree, postgraduate diploma) conveys trustworthy information about the level, nature and subject of study. See paragraphs 6.13–6.24.

## How the frameworks are required to be used

2.14 *Chapter A1* of the Quality Code sets out an Expectation about the use of UK and European reference points. The following extract relates to the use of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications:

In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

- a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland/The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* are met by:
- positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
  - ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
  - naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications
  - awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes.

2.15 Higher education providers that do not have degree awarding powers but which work with degree-awarding bodies to deliver programmes leading to higher education qualifications do not carry the same responsibilities for academic standards. However they need to understand how threshold academic standards are both set and maintained and are responsible for maintaining the academic standards of the degree-awarding body (see the introduction to Part A of the Quality Code).

## Quality assurance

2.16 Qualifications frameworks have credibility when the bodies awarding the qualifications undergo regular quality assurance. QAA conducts reviews of all UK degree-awarding bodies and publishes the findings in its reports. All reviews include an assessment of how degree-awarding bodies use the FHEQ or FQHEIS as a reference point in discharging their degree awarding powers. Review teams examine the means used by degree-awarding bodies to ensure that their qualifications meet the threshold academic standard set out in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications. Degree-awarding bodies demonstrate how they align the intended learning outcomes of their programmes with the level of the qualification as denoted by the relevant qualification descriptor in the FHEQ or FQHEIS (as applicable).

2.17 QAA reviews consider how:

- degree-awarding bodies' approval and review processes ensure that the structure of the programme (the volume, nature, and assessment of learning) is adequate to achieve the outcomes indicated by the qualification descriptors and to meet the other requirements of the frameworks (see Quality Code, Part A; *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval*; *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*; *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and Recognition of Prior Learning*; *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* and Quality Code, Part B *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*).
- the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are used by degree-awarding bodies to assure themselves that the achievement of students is of an academic standard which meets or exceeds the threshold standards set out in the relevant framework (see Part A; *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*).

In these ways, QAA quality assures the use of the UK higher education frameworks in order that stakeholders both nationally and internationally may have confidence in higher education qualifications awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies.

2.18 Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards and quality of programmes of study leading to qualifications that they award. They undertake this through an extensive and sophisticated range of internal quality assurance procedures which are underpinned by common principles across the sector (see Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards* and Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality).

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### Further guidelines, references and resources

For information on QAA's review methods and its reports: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports)

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## Status within Europe

2.19 Increasingly, higher education providers, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration and thus align with *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (QF-EHEA). The QF-EHEA provides a mechanism for relating the national qualifications frameworks of different countries to each other. All 47 countries participating in the Bologna Process are required to establish national frameworks for higher education qualifications which are quality assured by a competent body, and to verify the compatibility of their frameworks with the QF-EHEA. Compatibility with the QF-EHEA was verified by QAA in 2006 for the FQHEIS and 2008 for the FHEQ. The conclusions and implications of the verification processes for the UK, including an account of how the qualification descriptors of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications align with the qualification descriptors of the QF-EHEA (the Dublin descriptors), are published in:

QAA (2007) *Verification of Compatibility of the Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Report of the Scottish Working Group.*

QAA (2008) *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).*

2.20 Within the QF-EHEA, the term 'cycle' is used to describe the three sequential levels identified by the Bologna Process. These are first cycle (which can include short cycle qualifications - see paragraph 2.22), second cycle and third cycle, within which all European higher education qualifications are located. In broad terms, the first cycle corresponds to undergraduate qualifications (typically bachelor's degrees) and the second and third cycles correspond to postgraduate qualifications (typically master's degrees and doctoral degrees, respectively).

2.21 Like the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, the QF-EHEA has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle, known as the 'Dublin descriptors'.<sup>11</sup> These illustrate the typical abilities and achievements associated with qualifications that signify the completion of each cycle. The Dublin Descriptors are appended to this document as Annex B and may be used by higher education providers as an additional reference point.

2.22 In many other European countries, as in the UK, a range of higher education qualifications are available to students who have undertaken a programme of study within the QF-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 qualifications (within or linked only to the first cycle). Such qualifications may prepare students for employment while also providing preparation for, and access to, programmes which are located at the level of the end of the first cycle.

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<sup>11</sup> The Dublin descriptors were originally developed by the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) in 2004.

2.23 Table 1 (see page 17) indicates the relationship between the **levels** of the two UK frameworks for higher education qualifications and the **cycles** (short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) of the QF-EHEA.

2.24 A *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF) was also agreed by the European Parliament in April 2008 and the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are compatible with this.

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### **Further guidelines, references and resources**

Bologna Process-European Higher Education Area: [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)

Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks (2005) *A Framework for Qualifications of The European Higher Education Area*:  
[www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf).

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Bologna Process:  
[www.international.ac.uk/policy/ehea-bologna-process.aspx](http://www.international.ac.uk/policy/ehea-bologna-process.aspx)

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA): [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu)

Further information about the JQI and the Dublin Descriptors can be accessed at:  
[www.eua.be/typo3conf/ext/bzb\\_securelink/pushFile.php?cuid=2556&file=fileadmin/user\\_upload/files/EUA1\\_documents/dublin\\_descriptors.pdf](http://www.eua.be/typo3conf/ext/bzb_securelink/pushFile.php?cuid=2556&file=fileadmin/user_upload/files/EUA1_documents/dublin_descriptors.pdf)

QAA (2008) *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/en/publications/documents/verification-of-the-compatibility-of-the-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-england--wales-and-northern-lrel.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/verification-of-the-compatibility-of-the-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-england--wales-and-northern-lrel.pdf)

QAA (2007) *Verification of compatibility of the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland with the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Report of the Scottish working group*:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/verification-of-compatibility-scottish-FQHE.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/verification-of-compatibility-scottish-FQHE.pdf)

Summaries of the conclusions and implications of these verification processes and their reports are published in:

QAA (2011) *The Bologna Process in higher education: Compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/bologna-process-in-he.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/bologna-process-in-he.pdf)

QAA (2007) *The Bologna Process in higher education: Compatibility of The framework of higher education institutions in Scotland with the European Higher Education Area*:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/the-bologna-process-in-he-2007.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/the-bologna-process-in-he-2007.pdf)

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## Relationship with other UK national qualifications frameworks

2.25 Other national qualifications frameworks (which incorporate vocational education and training and general and secondary education) in the UK comprise:

- frameworks comprising both general education and vocational qualifications (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland): the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)<sup>12</sup>
- an integrated overarching credit and qualifications framework in Scotland, embracing all educational sectors, and of which the FQHEIS is a constituent part: the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)<sup>13</sup>
- a meta-framework for credit and qualifications in Wales embracing all post-14 education and training, and of which the FHEQ is a constituent part: the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW).<sup>14</sup>

2.26 England and Northern Ireland, therefore, currently have three national qualifications frameworks, and the FHEQ is separate from those that comprise general education and vocational qualifications. The NQF and the QCF each have eight levels (numbered 1-8) and also support qualifications at lower levels (entry levels 1, 2 and 3). Qualifications aligned to each of the two frameworks include both vocational and general education qualifications. Both the NQF and the QCF provide for higher level qualifications (at levels 4 to 8) which compare with the corresponding levels of the FHEQ. There are opportunities for progression from qualifications on one framework to qualifications on another framework. HNDs on the QCF, for example, may provide entry to the second or third year of some bachelor's degree programmes.

2.27 In order to demonstrate the links between these various frameworks and how qualifications in the different jurisdictions of the UK and its close neighbour the Republic of Ireland compare with each other, the authorities responsible for the frameworks have produced a guide to the national qualifications frameworks (and the qualifications offered) in each of the countries: *Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries - A Rough Guide to Comparing Qualifications in the UK and Ireland*. This guide enables comparisons to be drawn between qualifications and their levels, rather than direct equivalences. This guide is maintained by QAA.

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### Further guidelines, references and resources

Office of Qualification and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual): Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF):

<http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/qualification-frameworks/>

Ofqual: National Qualifications Framework (NQF):

<http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/qualification-frameworks/>

Ofqual: <http://ofqual.gov.uk>

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

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales: [www.cqfw.net](http://www.cqfw.net)

QAA (2013) *Qualifications Can Cross Boundaries - A Rough Guide to Comparing Qualifications in the UK and Ireland*:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.pdf)

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12 The NQF and the QCF are maintained in England and Northern Ireland by the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual) in conjunction with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland (CCEA), and in Wales by the Welsh Government. Ofqual regulates general and vocational education qualifications taken in England and vocational qualifications that are taken in Northern Ireland. CCEA regulates general education qualifications taken in Northern Ireland; and in Wales, all qualifications other than those conferred by degree-awarding bodies are regulated by the Welsh Government. Each of the regulators uses the NQF and the QCF as regulatory tools.

13 The SCQF is managed by the SCQF Partnership.

14 The CQFW is managed by the Welsh Government.

## Relationship with credit

2.28 The SCQF, the CQFW and the QCF are all integrated credit and qualifications frameworks which means that they specify minimum credit volumes and levels for qualifications. As noted in paragraph 2.25, the FQHEIS is a constituent part of the SCQF and therefore refers to credit requirements; the credit arrangements in the FQHEIS/SCQF apply to all degree-awarding bodies in Scotland. All degree-awarding bodies in Wales have agreed to use the credit arrangements stipulated in the CQFW (of which the FHEQ is an integral part, forming the higher education qualifications pillar).

2.29 The FHEQ is a **qualifications** framework, based on the outcomes represented by the main qualification titles. It is not an integrated credit and qualifications framework, nor is its use dependent on credit. This is because not all degree-awarding bodies in England use credit. Some do not use credit at all and some use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to support student mobility within Europe and award ECTS points rather than UK credit. Nevertheless, credit is widely used by most degree-awarding bodies in England and Northern Ireland in the design and management of their taught programmes and has been for many years. A higher education credit framework has been agreed, and all degree-awarding bodies in England and Northern Ireland that award credit (other than ECTS) are required to use this. It is designed to be complementary to the FHEQ and therefore uses the same levels and refers to the main qualification types as the FHEQ.

2.30 The various credit frameworks used within the UK operate according to the same underpinning principles (for example 10 notional hours of learning equate to one credit). The guidance in these credit frameworks, therefore, also supports a consistent approach to the award of credit across the higher education sector. The credit frameworks for England/Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland provide guidance on the minimum credit requirements associated with the typical qualifications at each level of the relevant UK framework for higher education qualifications. All higher education providers awarding credit are required to use the relevant credit framework alongside the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications (see *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards* of the Quality Code).

2.31 Annex C of this document sets out, for information, the minimum credit requirements specified by the relevant credit frameworks for each of the jurisdictions in the UK. However, the authoritative sources should be consulted for up to date and comprehensive information on credit requirements.

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### Further guidelines, references and resources

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

For the CQFW: [www.cqfw.net](http://www.cqfw.net)

For the QCF: <http://ofqual.gov.uk/qualifications-and-assessments/qualification-frameworks/>

For the higher education credit framework used in England and Northern Ireland:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/academic-credit-framework.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/academic-credit-framework.pdf)

QAA (2009) *Academic Credit in Higher Education in England - an Introduction*:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/academic-credit-in-higher-education-in-england---an-introduction.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/academic-credit-in-higher-education-in-england---an-introduction.pdf)

QAA (2008) *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications and Credit: How They Relate to Academic Standards*:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/the-frameworks-for-higher-education-qualifications-and-credit-how-they-relate-to-academic-standards.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/the-frameworks-for-higher-education-qualifications-and-credit-how-they-relate-to-academic-standards.pdf)

For information on ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System):  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ects\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ects_en.htm)

UK HE Europe Unit (2009) UK HE Europe Unit guidance on the relationship between UK arrangements for academic credit and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS):  
[www.international.ac.uk/media/1524454/UK%20HE%20Guidance%20Credit%20in%20England%20-%20ECTS%20-%20July%202009.pdf](http://www.international.ac.uk/media/1524454/UK%20HE%20Guidance%20Credit%20in%20England%20-%20ECTS%20-%20July%202009.pdf)

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## 3 The frameworks and their levels

### The levels

3.1 As noted in paragraph 2.12, each of the two UK frameworks for higher education qualifications has a number of different framework levels. These define the outcomes of progressively more challenging learning (and typical qualifications) in ascending order. To convey the relative position of levels of achievement and/or qualifications, each framework level is assigned a number.

3.2 Each framework level is illustrated by a qualification descriptor for the typical qualification awarded by degree-awarding bodies at that level (see paragraphs 2.10 and 4.1). Each qualification type is determined by reference to the relevant qualification descriptor. In some cases, programmes leading to higher education qualifications, particularly those taken over a number of years, involve learning that is progressively more challenging across more than one level. For example, integrated master's degrees involve learning across levels 4-7 of the FHEQ and levels 7-11 of the FQHEIS. For the award of a higher education qualification at a specific level, the programme outcomes of this learning reflect, in a holistic way, the qualification descriptor for that final level. Each level of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications encompasses a range of qualifications. Each framework level is deliberately broad to provide flexibility and space for the development of new qualifications, for example, occupationally related awards.

3.3 The number of levels in each of the two UK frameworks for higher education qualifications is different, reflecting the different philosophies, structures and approaches to education adopted in the different jurisdictions. There are also differences in types of qualifications awarded. Bachelor's degrees with honours are typically four years in Scotland but three years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The four-year honours degree in Scotland was designed with two elements in mind: first that it would fit with the Scottish tradition of providing a broadly based education, allowing individuals to delay specialisation for as long as possible; secondly that it would allow progression for students to university following achievement of Scottish Highers. Students at Scottish schools usually sit Highers at the end of their fifth year of secondary school and might choose to enter university at that point.<sup>15</sup>

3.4 The FHEQ has five framework levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. The levels of the FHEQ are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher education on the QCF, the NQF and the CQFW. The FQHEIS has six framework levels, four of which are undergraduate and two postgraduate. As the FQHEIS is nested in the SCQF, the numbering of the levels are those of the SCQF and start at 7 reflecting the different numbers of levels in general and secondary education in Scotland. As a consequence, the numbers attached to the various levels are different (for instance, the level for doctoral qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is 8 but in Scotland it is 12).<sup>16</sup>

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15 However, increasing numbers of Scottish students remain in secondary school for a sixth year, at which point they may study additional Highers or re-sit Highers they took in fifth year with a view to improving their results. Students in sixth year may also take Advanced Highers which sit at the same level on the qualifications framework (SCQF level 7) as subjects taught during the traditional first year at a Scottish university. Depending on the subject match between the Advanced Highers achieved and the programme the student wishes to study at university, it may be possible for the student to gain entry directly into the second year of an honours degree programme (that is, entering at SCQF level 8). Students with Scottish school qualifications wishing to gain entry to an English university are usually expected to achieve Advanced Highers in relevant subjects in order to gain entry to the first year of an honours degree programme in England. Students in Scottish schools can also take a relatively new qualification called the Scottish baccalaureate. Baccalaureates are offered in four broad discipline areas: science, languages, expressive arts and social sciences. They involve students taking a 'cluster' of Advanced Highers and Highers, together with an interdisciplinary project in which the candidate applies the knowledge they have acquired to a realistic context.

16 Where programmes of study include an integrated foundation year which is designed to enable entry to a specified degree programme or programmes on successful completion, the level of the final qualification is used as the reference point. In these cases, it may also be necessary to use other external reference points in addition to FHEQ/FQHEIS to set academic standards for the foundation element. If the foundation provision is free-standing, and does not have a direct relationship with a specified higher education programme, it is not covered by the FHEQ/FQHEIS, and may be subject to other regulatory requirements.

3.5 At the postgraduate levels, the FHEQ and the FQHEIS have common structures, qualification titles and qualification descriptors. Level 8 on the FHEQ is aligned with SCQF level 12 of the FQHEIS; and level 7 of the FHEQ is aligned with SCQF level 11, on the FQHEIS. Below the postgraduate levels, the honours degree level in Scotland (SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS) and the level for bachelor's degrees (SCQF level 9 on the FQHEIS) are in alignment with level 6 on the FHEQ. Below this point, the frameworks reflect the particular features of the different educational structures and contexts.

3.6 The framework levels of the two UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, with examples of typical qualifications at each level, are represented in Table 1 (see page 17).

## About Table 1

3.7 Column 1 lists the main types of higher education qualifications awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies within each level. The list of qualification titles and acronyms indicated in brackets is not comprehensive but gives some typical examples. Degree-awarding bodies have the autonomy to determine their own qualification titles.

3.8 Columns 2 and 3 give the levels of the FHEQ and FQHEIS to which these qualification types are assigned. The table indicates the alignment between the two frameworks; the framework levels which are placed alongside each other are deemed to be broadly comparable.

3.9 Column 4 gives the corresponding cycle of the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (QF-EHEA) (see paragraphs 2.20 to 2.23). The fourth cell down in this column is shaded because postgraduate diplomas and postgraduate certificates do not meet the expectations for end of second cycle qualifications. Similarly, the sixth cell down is shaded because graduate diplomas, graduate certificates and the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) do not meet the expectations for end of first cycle qualifications. The final cell is shaded because HNCs, Cert HE and other certificates at this level are not regarded as short cycle qualifications within the first cycle as defined by the Dublin descriptors and the QF-EHEA.<sup>17</sup>

3.10 Table 1, therefore, delineates (in a European context) points of integration and overlap between different qualification types awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies, shows how qualification types are positioned in relation to each other and indicates routes (and barriers) for progression.

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<sup>17</sup> See page 44 of the *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)*; for the relevant links see page 12.

**Table 1: Examples of the typical higher education qualifications at levels of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies and their corresponding cycle in the QF-EHEA**

Within each level, the various qualifications involve different volumes of learning and hence differences in the range of intended learning outcomes.

Typical higher education qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies within each level	FHEQ	FQHEIS	Corresponding QF-EHEA cycle
	FHEQ level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	
Doctoral degrees (eg, PhD/DPhil, EdD, DBA, DClinPsy) <sup>c</sup>	8	12	Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Master's degrees (eg, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	11	Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Integrated master's degrees (eg, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm) <sup>d</sup>			
Primary qualifications (or first degrees) in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (eg, MB ChB, MB BS, BM BS <sup>e</sup> ; BDS; BVSc, BVMS) <sup>f</sup>			
Postgraduate diplomas			
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) <sup>g</sup> /Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) <sup>h</sup>			
Postgraduate certificates	6	9	First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg BA/BSc Hons)			
Bachelor's degrees			
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland <sup>g</sup>			
Graduate diplomas			
Graduate certificates <sup>i</sup>	5	NA	Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications
Foundation degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc)		8	
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		NA	
Higher National Diplomas (HND) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson <sup>j</sup>	4	NA	
Higher National Certificates (HNC) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson <sup>j</sup>		NA	
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)		7	

## Notes to Table 1

- <sup>a</sup> The framework levels of the FHEQ are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher education in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and in the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW).
- <sup>b</sup> As the FQHEIS is nested in the SCQF, the numbering of the levels are those of the SCQF.
- <sup>c</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 study at level 7 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS representing no more than one-third of this.
- <sup>d</sup> Integrated master's degree programmes typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and five in Scotland, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS (ie at the level of the qualification). Thus study at bachelor's level is integrated with study at master's level and the programmes are designed to meet the qualification descriptors in full at level 6 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS and level 7 of the FHEQ/level 11 of the FQHEIS.
- <sup>e</sup> These are all abbreviated forms for the degrees of Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery.
- <sup>f</sup> Primary qualifications in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and five in Scotland, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS (ie at the level of the qualification). Thus study at bachelor's level is integrated with study at master's level and the programmes are designed to meet the qualification descriptors in full at level 6 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS and level 7 of the FHEQ/level 11 of the FQHEIS. For historical reasons the qualifications retain the title 'Bachelor' (see paragraph 4.17.5).
- <sup>g</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 title Postgraduate Certificate in Education is reserved for those PGCE qualifications that are set at level 7 of the FHEQ and align with the qualification descriptor for level 7. The title Professional Graduate Certificates in Education is used for those PGCE qualifications that are set level 6 of the FHEQ and align with the FHEQ qualification descriptor at level 6. See below for details of where the full statement may be accessed.
- <sup>h</sup> In Scotland, the qualification equivalent to the Postgraduate Certificate in Education is typically the Postgraduate Diploma in Education.
- <sup>i</sup> In Scotland, graduate certificates may be either at SCQF level 9 or level 10 on the FQHEIS.
- <sup>j</sup> In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, HNDs and HNCs may either be awarded by degree-awarding bodies under a licence from Pearson (which allows them to devise, deliver and award Higher National qualifications themselves), or they may be awarded directly by Pearson. The majority of these qualifications are awarded by Pearson. Only those HNDs and HNCs that are awarded by degree-awarding bodies are included on the FHEQ (because this framework comprises qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies). Pearson is not a degree-awarding body but an awarding organisation regulated by Ofqual. HNDs and HNCs awarded directly by Pearson are regulated qualifications at level 5 and level 4 respectively on the QCF and CQFW and are subject to the academic standards and regulations of Pearson and the requirements of the QCF and the CQFW. In Scotland, HNDs and HNCs are awarded exclusively by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (which is not a degree-awarding body) and are at level 8 and 7 respectively of the SCQF.

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## Further guidelines, references and resources

Statement on the PGCE qualification:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/qualifications](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/qualifications)

Pearson Qualifications: <http://beta.qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications.html>

Scottish Qualifications Authority: [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk)

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# 4 The qualification descriptors

4.1 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications use qualification descriptors (as does the QF-EHEA) to exemplify the general nature and outcomes of the main type of qualification at each framework level. The qualification descriptors are generic in nature and can be applied across subjects and modes of learning. They make clear how the qualification differs from other qualifications, both at that level and at other levels. They provide clear points of reference for each level and cover the great majority of existing qualifications.

4.2 An alternative approach, used by some other frameworks within the UK and Ireland, is to use level descriptors to describe the relative intellectual demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy associated with a particular level of learning and achievement. These set out a broader range of outcomes associated with a given level.

4.3 Qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first part<sup>18</sup> 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 is a statement of the national threshold academic standard for the qualification. This part is of particular relevance to degree-awarding bodies in designing, approving, assessing and reviewing academic programmes. They need to be satisfied that, for any programme, the learning opportunities and assessment provides every student with the opportunity to achieve, and to demonstrate achievement of, the intended programme learning outcomes (see paragraph 2.11). See Expectations A1, A3.1, A3.2, A3.3 and A3.4 of the Quality Code.

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

4.5 Each qualification descriptor sets out the outcomes for the typical or main qualification type at each framework level. For levels 6, 7 and 8 of the FHEQ and SCQF levels 9, 10, 11 and 12 on the FQHEIS, this is a degree. Paragraphs 6.13–6.24 specify the titling conventions for qualifications at each level and specifically for the use of the title 'degree' for both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

4.6 At most levels there is more than one type of qualification that may be achieved (for example postgraduate diplomas and certificates in addition to master's degrees at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS). Within each level, the various types of qualifications involve different volumes of learning (for example master's degrees entail more learning than postgraduate certificates). As a consequence of this there are differences in the range and nature of intended programme learning outcomes. Not all of the qualification types at each level therefore meet all of the expectations of the qualification descriptor. Where a qualification type other than the main qualification has a smaller volume of learning, the qualification descriptor for the degree is used as a reference point and the sub-degree qualification is expected to meet the descriptor in part. Paragraphs 4.10–4.18.6 provide further information about the qualification descriptor for each level of the framework. They explain which qualifications meet the descriptor in full, and where the qualification descriptor is used as a reference point for other qualifications at the same framework level.

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<sup>18</sup> The part of the descriptor that begins 'Qualifications xx are awarded to students who have demonstrated:'.

4.7 Short programmes are often offered as continuing professional development opportunities. The qualification descriptors provide points of reference that help providers determine which level of the relevant UK framework should be assigned to any qualifications resulting from these programmes. The titling conventions of qualifications (paragraphs 6.13–6.23) are used to determine an appropriate title.

4.8 QAA keeps 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 subject benchmark statements (see paragraphs 5.2–5.4) or European developments, for example arising from the Bologna Process.

4.9 The following paragraphs set out the qualification descriptors included in each of the two UK frameworks for higher education qualifications. At undergraduate levels, there are two separate descriptors for the Cert HE (one for the FHEQ and one for the FQHEIS), a qualification descriptor for the foundation degree on the FHEQ and a qualification descriptor for the DipHE on the FQHEIS, a qualification descriptor for the bachelor's non-honours degree in Scotland and two separate descriptors for bachelor's degrees with honours (one for the FHEQ and one for the FQHEIS). At postgraduate levels, there is a single qualification descriptor for FHEQ level 7/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS and single descriptor for FHEQ level 8/SCQF level 12 on the FQHEIS which the frameworks share. The qualification descriptors that relate to the FHEQ are tinted **green** and those that relate to the FQHEIS are tinted **blue**. Those qualification descriptors tinted **purple** are common to both the FHEQ and the FQHEIS.

#### **4.10 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 4 on the FHEQ:**

##### **Certificate of Higher Education**

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

##### **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.

4.10.1 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.

#### **4.11 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at SCQF level 7 on the FQHEIS: Certificate of Higher Education**

##### **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 definitive record for the relevant programme (see Quality Code, *Chapter A2: Degree-awarding bodies' reference points for academic standards*).

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

- 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.
- An understanding of the major theories, principles and concepts.
- Familiarity with some of the routine materials, techniques and practices of the subject.
- 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:**

- 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;
- communicate the results of their study and other work accurately and reliably, and within structured and coherent arguments;
- undertake further learning within a structured and managed environment;
- 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.

#### 4.12 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5 on the FHEQ: 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 should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 5 of the FHEQ, including Diplomas of Higher Education, Higher National Diplomas, etc.

##### 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.

4.12.1 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*).<sup>19</sup>

4.12.2 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.

<sup>19</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Foundation-degree-qualification-benchmark-2010.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Foundation-degree-qualification-benchmark-2010.pdf)

#### **4.13 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at SCQF level 8 on the FQHEIS: Diploma of Higher Education**

##### **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 definitive record for the relevant programme.

##### **Diplomas of Higher Education are awarded to students who have demonstrated:**

- 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.
- 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).
- Familiarity and effective deployment of essential/routine materials, techniques and practices of the subject(s).
- 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 qualification will be able to:**

- 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;
- communicate the results of their study and other work accurately and reliably using a range of specialist techniques;
- identify and address their own major learning needs within defined contexts and to undertake guided further learning in new areas;
- 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.

#### **4.14 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at SCQF level 9 on the FQHEIS: bachelor's (non-honours) degree in Scotland**

The bachelor's (non-honours) degree in Scotland 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 as 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 definitive record for the programme. Many degrees that 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 paragraph 4.17.6). The bachelor's (non-honours) degree in Scotland is a recognised entry requirement to a number of professions across the UK.

##### **Bachelor's degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:**

- 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.
- 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.
- Familiarity and competence in the use of routine materials, practices and skills and of a few that are more specialised, advanced and complex.
- 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 qualification will be able to:**

- 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;
- 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);
- identify and address their own learning needs, including being able to draw on a range of current research, development and professional materials;
- 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.

#### **4.15 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6 on the FHEQ: 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 should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 6 of the FHEQ, including bachelor's degrees, and graduate diplomas.

##### **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.

4.15.1 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.

4.15.2 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.

4.15.3 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 or four full-time academic years and lead to qualifications 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.

#### **4.16 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS: bachelor's degree with honours in Scotland**

##### **General**

The bachelor's degree with honours in Scotland 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 the definitive records for individual programmes. 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 paragraph 4.17.6). The honours degree is the recognised 'normal' entry requirement to postgraduate study and to many professions across the UK.

##### **Honours degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:**

- 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.
- 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).
- 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.
- A comprehensive knowledge and familiarity with essential and advanced materials, techniques and skills including some at the forefront of the subject.
- 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 honours degree will be able to:**

- 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;
- communicate the results of their study and other work accurately and reliably using the full repertoire of the principal concepts and constructs of the subject(s);
- 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;
- 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.

#### **4.17 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7 on the FHEQ and SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS: master's degree**

The descriptor provided for this level of the frameworks is for any master's degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 7/ SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS, 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.

4.17.1 Much of the study undertaken for master's degrees is at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Successful students show originality in the application of knowledge, and they understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They are able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they show originality in tackling and solving problems. They have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

4.17.2 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).

4.17.3 Master's degrees are often distinguished from other qualifications at this framework 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.

4.17.4 Some master's degrees, for example, in science, engineering and mathematics, comprise an integrated programme of study spanning several levels. Such programmes typically involve study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and five in Scotland. Of this, study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS and the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves meet the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7/level 11 in full. Study at bachelor's level is integrated with study at master's level and the programmes are designed to meet the qualification descriptors in full at level 6 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS as well as those at level 7 of the FHEQ/level 11 of the FQHEIS. Such qualifications are often termed 'integrated master's' as an acknowledgement of the prior period of study at lower levels (which typically meets the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6/level 10).

4.17.5 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/level 11, these qualifications may often retain, for historical reasons, titles of Bachelor of Medicine, and 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. The use of the title 'Dr' by medical doctors is a historical abbreviation for the profession; it does not indicate a qualification at doctoral level (level 8 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 12 on the FQHEIS).

4.17.6 In Scotland a small number of universities (Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh and St Andrews (the Scottish Ancients) have a long tradition of labelling certain undergraduate academic degrees as Master of Arts 'MA'. This title reflects historic Scottish custom and practice; there is no implication that the outcomes of the programmes are at SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS. These programmes are at SCQF level 9 or 10 on the FQHEIS.

4.17.7 The Master of Arts (MA) awards 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's degree. 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.

#### **4.18 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8 on the FHEQ and SCQF level 12 on the FQHEIS: doctoral degree**

The descriptor provided for this level of the frameworks is for any doctoral degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other level 8/level 12 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.

4.18.1 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.

4.18.2 Holders of doctoral degrees are able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Holders of doctoral degrees 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.

4.18.3 Doctoral programmes that may have a substantial taught element in addition to the research component (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.

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

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

4.18.6 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 that has been previously published in a peer-refereed context is submitted for assessment. Most degree awarding bodies restrict candidacy to graduates or their own academic staff of several years' standing.

## 5 Using UK qualification descriptors

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

5.1 **Qualification descriptors** are generic statements of the intended outcomes of study which span subjects (see paragraphs 4.1–4.8). Many academic programmes aim to develop both general and specific skills. These latter are not explicitly addressed in the qualification descriptors as many skills, and the extent to which they need to be developed, are subject or profession specific. As such, they are addressed more appropriately in Subject Benchmark Statements and individual programme learning outcomes.

5.2 **Subject Benchmark Statements** provide more detailed statements on the intended outcomes in particular subjects (see *Chapter A1: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards* of the Quality Code). These exemplify what the outcomes (in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills) and attributes identified in the qualification descriptor would look like in a specific subject area. Subject Benchmark Statements set out threshold (and in most cases typical) academic standards for bachelor's degrees with honours, and for master's degrees where there is significant taught provision in a subject (for example, in subjects where integrated master's qualifications are widespread). There are also statements specifically for health professions and Scottish benchmark statements for qualifying awards for professions in Scotland which have been developed and published jointly by QAA, the relevant professional body and the Scottish Government.

5.3 In areas where there is no Subject 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.

5.4 Degree-awarding bodies are expected to consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements in order to secure national threshold academic standards (see Expectation A1).

5.5 Additional statements and guidance on the **qualification characteristics of certain types of qualifications** (doctoral degrees, master's degrees and foundation degrees) are also published by QAA. These constitute additional reference points providing information about the purposes, content, and assessment methods of the different types of these degree qualifications (see *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards* of the Quality Code). Degree-awarding bodies are required to consider and take account of this guidance (see Expectation A1).

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#### Further guidelines, references and resources

Information about subject benchmark statements may be accessed at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a)  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements)

QAA (2011): *Doctoral Degree Characteristics*

[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/doctoral\\_characteristics.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/doctoral_characteristics.pdf)

QAA (2010): *Master's Degree Characteristics*

[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/masters-degree-characteristics-2010.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/masters-degree-characteristics-2010.pdf)

QAA (2010): *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*

[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Foundation-degree-qualification-benchmark-2010.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Foundation-degree-qualification-benchmark-2010.pdf)

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## The relationship between qualification descriptors and degree-awarding bodies' own reference points

5.6 For each individual programme of study and qualification, specific statements about the intended learning outcomes are drawn up and approved by the degree-awarding body which is awarding the qualification. These include separate statements of outcomes for any intermediate or exit qualifications associated with the programme of study. The outcomes (or award criteria in the case of research degrees) are expected to align with the qualification descriptor for the relevant level and also with any relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

5.7 Programme learning outcomes form part of the definitive record for each programme and qualification which constitutes the reference point for delivery, assessment, monitoring and review of the programme and for the provision of records of study (see Quality Code, *Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards*). The framework level of each programme and qualification is also recorded in the definitive record and is publicly available.

5.8 Thus three elements which underpin the outcomes-based approach to qualifications (see paragraph 2.9), namely qualification descriptors, Subject Benchmark Statements and individual programme learning outcomes, interact with each other. At programme level, these three elements link the nationally agreed frameworks for higher education qualifications, subject communities and individual degree-awarding bodies.

5.9 Students are provided with a detailed record of their studies when they leave their programme of study (on completion or earlier), which gives evidence of their achievement. This may be in the form of a transcript, Diploma Supplement and/or Higher Education Achievement Report. See Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision.

## 6 Responsibilities for implementing an outcomes-based approach to the award of qualifications

### Positioning qualifications at the appropriate levels of the frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies

6.1 As autonomous bodies awarding their own qualifications, degree-awarding bodies are responsible for demonstrating that each of their qualifications is assigned the appropriate level of the relevant UK framework for higher education qualifications (see Expectation A1 of the Quality Code). Degree-awarding bodies consider with which framework level the majority of programme outcomes most closely correspond (using the qualification descriptor as a reference point). For example, a programme leading to a graduate certificate or graduate diploma might have some outcomes at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS, but positioning it at this level and the use of the 'postgraduate' title for the award would be justified only if most or all of the outcomes were assessed at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS. This process is achieved through programme approval. Programme approval is the quality assurance process used by degree-awarding bodies to scrutinise a proposed programme of study in order to assure that it meets the UK threshold standards for the qualification and the academic standards and quality of the degree-awarding body awarding the qualification. See Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*; *Chapter B8: Programme Design, Development and Approval* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*.

## Aligning programme learning outcomes with the relevant qualification descriptor in the frameworks for higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies

6.2 Degree-awarding bodies are also responsible for ensuring that individual programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications (see Expectation A1) of the Quality Code. Not all qualifications meet in full the qualification descriptor for the main qualification at a specific level. Where qualifications are differentiated by the volume of learning, this in turn leads to variation in the range of intended learning outcomes (see paragraph 4.6). The individual qualification descriptors explain which qualifications meet the descriptor in full, and where the qualification descriptor is used as a reference point for other qualifications at the same framework level.

6.3 Degree-awarding bodies are also expected to consider and take account of the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements when setting programme learning outcomes for bachelor's degrees with honours and certain master's degrees (see paragraphs 5.2–5.4).

## Designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing programmes and qualifications

6.4 When designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing programmes of study, degree-awarding bodies consider:

- the alignment between the intended learning outcomes of the programme and the expectations set out in the qualification descriptors of the relevant UK framework for higher education qualifications (see Expectations A3.1 and A3.3)
- 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
- whether, in the case of research degrees, the intended programmes meet the Expectation of *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*.

6.5 Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for ensuring that the learning experience delivered is coherent and that due consideration is given to *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval*, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees* of the Quality Code. In addition, degree-awarding bodies take account of the regulatory and other requirements of any PSRBs which recognise or accredit specific programmes for professional purposes. See Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*.

6.6 Degree-awarding bodies ensure that the design of programmes facilitates academic and intellectual progression. However, it is for degree-awarding bodies to decide how this is best demonstrated, whether by a credit structure or otherwise. There is no assumption that progression through a programme should be demonstrated by reference to the descriptors of outcomes of intermediate qualifications. It is not the purpose of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications to prescribe the internal organisation of academic programmes. However, separate programme learning outcomes are approved for any intermediate or exit qualifications which align with the qualification descriptor for the relevant level. These intermediate or exit qualifications are awarded only in respect of positive achievement of the relevant programme learning outcomes (see paragraphs 6.10– 6.12).

6.7 Those developing academic programmes are bound to make some assumptions about the amount of learning that is likely to be necessary to achieve the intended outcomes. In some cases this is expressed in terms of volume of study, for example a number of academic years. In other cases this is expressed through academic credit. As noted in paragraph 2.29, the FHEQ does not specify minimum or typical volumes of learning for qualifications by reference to units of credit. A 'degree', for example, can properly be awarded only when the expectations of the relevant qualification descriptor have been met or exceeded. Within a three or four year degree programme, the learning outcomes required at the level of the qualification (as opposed to outcomes required at the earlier levels of study) are unlikely to be achieved in less than the equivalent of one academic year's full-time study, and see notes d and f to Table 1. See also paragraphs 6.15 and 6.19 on the use of the title 'degree'.

6.8 As autonomous bodies, degree-awarding bodies determine the titles of qualifications which they choose to award. In order to promote consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, volume, nature and subjects of study provided, paragraphs 6.13-6.24 set out the titling conventions which degree-awarding bodies are required to observe.

## Assessment of learning outcomes

6.9 Effective and appropriate assessment is essential to the operation of a qualifications framework based on learning outcomes. It is the setting and assessment of the outcomes of learning that is important, rather than the nature of any component element of study. Assessment is used to give students the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the relevant programme learning outcomes. Degree-awarding bodies judge student performance against the standards set and ensure that qualifications are awarded only where the relevant learning outcomes have been achieved in this way (see Expectation A3.2). In the case of research degree qualifications, learning outcomes or criteria for the award of the qualification (aligned with the relevant qualification descriptor) are tested in assessment. See also Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*; *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*; *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*; and *Chapter B7: External Examining*.

## Awarding qualifications

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

6.11 A student who has failed to achieve the required programme learning outcomes for a qualification at a specific level may be considered for the award of a qualification at a lower level. However, the lower qualification is awarded only if the student has demonstrated the programme learning outcomes required (or award criteria in the case of research degrees) for that (lower) qualification. For example:

- a student who has failed to achieve the required outcomes for a bachelor's degree may only be awarded a DipHE if the student has demonstrated the outcomes specified for a DipHE (at level 5 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 8 on the FQHEIS) on that programme
- a student who has failed to achieve the required outcomes for a doctoral degree (at level 8 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 12 on the FQHEIS) may only be awarded an MPhil if the student has demonstrated the outcomes and satisfied the award criteria specified for an MPhil (at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS).

6.12 Degree-awarding bodies ensure that:

- the programme learning outcomes<sup>20</sup> required for each of their programmes and qualifications are specified clearly (including those for any intermediate or exit qualifications within them)
- achievement of the relevant programme learning outcomes<sup>21</sup> is demonstrated before a qualification is awarded
- assessment procedures that permit compensation or condonement are not applied in a way that might allow a qualification to be awarded without achievement, in full, of the programme learning outcomes being demonstrated.

See Expectation A1 and also the Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*; *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*; and *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*.

## Titling conventions for qualifications

6.13 Public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications requires transparent and consistent use of qualification titles.

6.14 The title of any qualification accurately reflects the level of achievements, appropriately represents the nature, volume and field(s) of study undertaken and is not misleading. See Expectation A1 of the Quality Code.

### Level

6.15 In order to ensure that qualification titles accurately convey 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) are used only for qualifications that meet, in full, the expectations of the qualification descriptors at level 6, level 7 and level 8 on the FHEQ and SCQF levels 10, 11 and 12 on the FQHEIS respectively (but see note to the master's degree qualification descriptor)
- titles with the stem 'graduate' (for example, 'graduate diploma') are 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 on the FHEQ or SCQF levels 9 or 10 on the FQHEIS
- titles with the stem 'postgraduate' (for example, 'postgraduate diploma') are restricted to qualifications where the learning outcomes of the programme of study match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS or above.

6.16 In accordance with the above, the title Postgraduate Certificate in Education is reserved for those PGCE qualifications that are set at level 7 of the FHEQ and align with the qualification descriptor for level 7. The title Professional Graduate Certificates in Education is used for those PGCE qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that are set at level 6 of the FHEQ and align with the FHEQ qualification descriptor at level 6.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> or award criteria in the case of research degrees

<sup>21</sup> or award criteria in the case of research degrees

<sup>22</sup> In Scotland, Professional Graduate Diplomas in Education are at the same level as Postgraduate Diplomas in Education (SCQF level 11) and the use of the title 'Professional' does not imply a difference in level.

## Volume of study

6.17 As noted in 2.9, the award of higher education qualifications is premised on the demonstrated achievement of outcomes rather than years of study. Nevertheless, references are made to the volume of study in order to indicate the approximate time expected to achieve the relevant learning outcomes (see paragraph 6.7). The volume of study can therefore be used as an indicator of the range and depth of the learning outcomes and can, as a consequence, distinguish between types of qualifications at the same level.

6.18 The title 'diploma' generally indicates 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.

- Undergraduate diplomas (for example DipHE) are differentiated from undergraduate certificates (for example CertHE) by both level and volume of study; the former are at level 5 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 8 on the FQHEIS and the latter are at level 4 of the FHEQ/SCQF level 7 on the FQHEIS.
- Graduate diplomas and certificates are at the same level (6 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS) but are differentiated from each other by volume of study and learning outcomes. The title 'certificate' normally signifies learning outcomes which would imply study equivalent to at least one-third of a full-time academic year, and the title 'diploma' normally signifies study equivalent to at least two-thirds of a full-time academic year at the relevant level (and/or, where credit is awarded, the volume of credit specified by the relevant credit framework).
- Postgraduate diplomas and certificates are at the same level (7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS) but are differentiated from each other by volume of study and learning outcomes. The title 'certificate' normally signifies learning outcomes which would imply study equivalent to at least one-third of a full-time academic year, and the title 'diploma' normally signifies study equivalent to at least two-thirds of a full-time academic year at the relevant level (and/or, where credit is awarded, the volume of credit specified by the relevant credit framework).

## Nature of study

6.19 The title of 'degree' is awarded only for achievement in full of the outcomes set out in the relevant qualification descriptor as follows:

- 'foundation degree' is used only in respect of qualifications at levels 5 on the FHEQ
- 'bachelor's (non-honours) degree in Scotland' is used only in respect of qualifications at SCQF level 9 on the FQHEIS
- 'bachelor's degree with honours' is used only in respect of qualifications at level 6 on the FHEQ or SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS
- 'master's degree' is used only in respect of qualifications at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS
- 'doctoral degree' is used only in respect of qualifications at level 8 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 12 on the FQHEIS.

For foundation degrees, at level 5, the qualification should also be consistent with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*.

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

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

## Field of study

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

6.23 Qualification titles that reflect the subject focus of programmes of study in two disciplines (for example, a joint honours qualification) adopt 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.

6.24 Qualification titles do not normally reflect more than three subject components. Where there are more than three significant components, the title 'Combined Studies' is appropriate.

## Annex A: Advisory group

Name	Position	Affiliation
Dr Jack Aitken	Director, Senate Office	University of Glasgow
Wendy Appleby	Registrar and Head of Student & Registry services	University College London
Sarah Butler	Assistant Director, Quality Development Group	QAA (Chair)
Sarah Clark	Dean of Quality and Standards	University of Wales Trinity Saint David
Dr Kirsty Conlon	Head of Learning and Teaching and Widening Access	Universities Scotland
Nick Davy	HE Policy Manager	Association of Colleges (AoC)
Lysandre de-la-Haye	Director of Quality, Newman University	Guild HE
Dr Melinda Drowley	Head of Standards, Quality and Enhancement	QAA
Sheila Dunn	Manager	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership (SCQF)
Dr Dawn Edwards	Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement	Royal Northern College of Music
Nick Entwistle	Higher Education Research & Policy Officer	National Union Students (NUS)
Wilma Fee	Director of Academic and Student Affairs	Queen's University Belfast
Professor John Gratton	Pro Vice Chancellor Teaching & Learning	Aberystwyth University
Jacqui Hare	Deputy Vice Chancellor and Director of Student Experience/ Cardiff Metropolitan University	Higher Education Wales
Stella Heath	Assistant Director	QAA Scotland (Joint chair)
Professor Ann Holmes	Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic	University of Wolverhampton
Valerie Innes	Assistant Director	QAA Scotland
Professor Denise McAlister	Pro Vice Chancellor, Learning, Teaching and Student Experience	University of Ulster
John O'Connor	Manager NFQ Development	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
Rowena Pelik	Director (Formerly Director of Academic Strategy and Practice)	QAA Scotland (Edinburgh Napier University)
Alex Proudfoot	Association Manager	Study UK
Julie Swan	Associate Director Regulatory Policy and Vocational Qualification Policy	The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)
Greg Wade	Policy Advisor	Universities UK

## Corresponding members

Name	Position	Affiliation
Mag. Elisabeth Frank	Directorate General, Universities, Universities of Applied Sciences	Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research Austrian representative on the Bologna NQF national correspondents network
Trevor Clark	Head of European Alignment and Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)	Welsh Government
Aaron Porter	Director	National Centre for Universities and Businesses (NCUB)

## Observers

Name	Position	Affiliation
Philip Lomas	Senior Policy Adviser	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS)
Martina Brennan	Policy Officer	Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
Natalie Williams-Hunt	Head of NOS and CQFW Policy	Welsh Government

# Annex B: Dublin descriptors

## Shared Dublin descriptors for short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle awards<sup>23</sup>

The QF-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 are 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 of a 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 QF-EHEA.

The Dublin descriptors appear below (source: [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf)) 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<sup>24</sup> 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
- 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.

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<sup>23</sup> Previously referred to as bachelor's, master's and doctoral awards.

<sup>24</sup> General secondary education also includes vocational education with a sufficiently general component.

### **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>25</sup> approach to their work or vocation, and have competences<sup>26</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>27</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
- 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

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25 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.

26 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.

27 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'.

- 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 1st cycle (eg Bachelors), to 2nd cycle (eg Masters) to doctorates: the differences/'step changes' between the respective Dublin descriptors**

The Joint Quality Initiative has also compared the descriptors and identified the step changes found between cycles in each of these elements.

<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...
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...

## Annex C: Illustrative table of credit

This table is an illustration of credit arrangements across the four jurisdictions of the UK. It sets out the typical credit values associated with the design of programmes for the main higher education qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. For up to date and comprehensive information on credit, the relevant credit frameworks themselves should be consulted:

For the higher education credit framework used in England and Northern Ireland:  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/academic-credit-framework.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/publications/documents/academic-credit-framework.pdf)

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

For the CQFW: [www.cqfw.net](http://www.cqfw.net)

Values shown in columns 4-6 are the minimum that are typically associated with the qualification (plus any permissible minimum or maximum at a specified level shown in parentheses). In many cases the credits for qualifications will exceed the minimum.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ Level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	England/NI	Scotland	Wales	ECTS credit ranges from the QF-EHEA		
PhD/DPhil	8	12	Not typically credit-rated			Not typically credit-rated		
Professional doctorates (only if credit based) (EdD, DBA, DClinPsy)			540 (360 at FHEQ level 8)	540 (420 at SCQF Level 12)	540 (360 at FHEQ level 8 and a max of 30 at FHEQ level 6)			
Research master's degrees (eg MRes, MPhil)	7	11	Not typically credit-rated		180 (150 at FHEQ level 7 and a max of 30 at FHEQ level 6)	The minimum requirement is 60 ECTS; however a range of 90-100 ECTS credits is more typical at second cycle level		
Taught master's Degree (eg, MA, MSc)			180 (150 at FHEQ level 7)	180 (150 at SCQF Level 11)	180 (150 at FHEQ level 7 and a max of 30 at FHEQ level 6)			
Integrated master's degrees (eg, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm)			480 (120 at FHEQ level 7)	600 <sup>c</sup> (120 at SCQF Level 11)	480 (120 at FHEQ level 7 and max of 30 at CQFW level 3)			
Primary (or first) qualifications in medicine, (eg BM BS), dentistry (eg BDS) and veterinary science (eg BVSc)			Not typically credit-rated					
Postgraduate diplomas			120 (90 at FHEQ level 7)	120 (90 at SCQF Level 11)	120 (90 at FHEQ level 7 and max of 30 at FHEQ level 6)			
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in EWNI/ Postgraduate Diploma in Education in Scotland (PGDE)			60 (40 at FHEQ level 7)	60 (40 at SCQF level 11)	120 (40 at FHEQ level 7 and a max of 80 at FHEQ level 6)			
Postgraduate certificates			60 (40 at FHEQ level 7)	60 (40 at SCQF Level 11)	60 (40 at FHEQ level 7 and a max of 20 at FHEQ level 6)			

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ Level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	England/NI	Scotland	Wales	ECTS credit ranges from the QF-EHEA
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg, BA/BSc Hons)	6	10	360 (90 at FHEQ level 6)	480 <sup>c</sup> (90 at SCQF Level 10)	360 (90 at FHEQ level 6 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	180-240 ECTS credits
Bachelor's degrees		9	300 (60 at FHEQ level 6)	360 (60 at SCQF Level 9)	300 (60 at FHEQ level 6 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)		NA	60 (40 at FHEQ level 6)	NA	120 (90 at FHEQ level 6 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	
Graduate diplomas		9	80 (80 FHEQ level 6)	120 (at SCQF Level 9 or above)	120 (90 at FHEQ level 6 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	
Graduate certificates			40 (40 FHEQ level 6)	60 at SCQF Level 9 or above	60 (40 at FHEQ level 6 and a max of 20 at CQFW level 3)	
Foundation degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc)	5	8	240 (90 at FHEQ level 5)	NA	240 (90 at FHEQ level 5 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	Approximately 120 ECTS credits
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		8	240 (90 at FHEQ level 5)	240 (90 at SCQF Level 8 or above)	240 (90 at FHEQ level 5 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	
Higher National Diplomas (HND awarded by DABs <sup>d</sup> in England, Wales and NI under licence from Pearson)		NA	240 (90 at FHEQ level 5)	NA	240 (90 at FHEQ level 5 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ Level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	England/NI	Scotland	Wales	ECTS credit ranges from the QF-EHEA
Higher National Certificates (HNC awarded by DABs <sup>d</sup> in England, Wales and NI under licence from Pearson)	4	NA	150 (120 at FHEQ level 4)	NA	150 (30 at level 5 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	
Certificates of Higher Education (Cert HE)		7	120 (90 at FHEQ level 4)	120 (90 at SCQF Level 7 or above)	120 (90 at FHEQ level 4 and a max of 30 at CQFW level 3)	

#### Notes to table

- a The levels of the FHEQ are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher education in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW).
- b As the FQHEIS is nested in the SCQF, the numbering of the levels are those of the SCQF.
- c These qualifications in Scotland are a year longer than the counterparts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- d DAB is the abbreviated term for degree-awarding bodies.

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