



# **UK Quality Code for Higher Education**

## **Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards**

**The UK frameworks for higher education  
qualifications**

**Draft for consultation**

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# 1 Introduction

1.1 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications apply to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic qualifications, other than higher doctorates, granted by degree-awarding bodies<sup>1</sup> in the exercise of their degree awarding powers (see the Introduction to *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code)).<sup>2</sup> 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 *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code). They do not apply to honorary degrees or other honorary awards (which are not academic qualifications).

1.2 Providers are not entitled to claim that their qualifications are aligned to levels of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications unless those qualifications are awarded by degree-awarding bodies which subscribe to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and whose academic standards and quality are assured by QAA.

1.3 There are two parallel frameworks for higher education qualifications in the UK, one for Scotland and one for the rest of the UK:

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

The two UK frameworks share core purposes but reflect the features of these different education systems.

1.4 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are important reference points for providers of higher education and are formal components of *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards* of the Quality Code (see *Chapter A1: UK and European reference points for academic standards*). UK degree-awarding bodies are required to use the frameworks in setting academic standards and awarding qualifications and, in so doing, to ensure that the requirements of the frameworks are met. The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications assist UK higher education providers in maintaining academic standards; inform international comparability of academic standards, especially in the European context; support international competitiveness; and facilitate student and graduate mobility.

1.5 The fundamental premise of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications is that qualifications are awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment rather than years of study. Qualification descriptors are key to this premise. Qualification descriptors set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of individual qualifications. The qualification descriptors contained in the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications exemplify the outcomes and attributes expected of learning that results in the award of UK higher education qualifications. These outcomes represent the integration of learning acquired through designated and coherent programmes of study. These qualifications, which develop students with high-level analytical skills and a broad

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<sup>1</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](#)).

<sup>2</sup> *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx).

range of competences, are therefore distinct from training or solely the acquisition of higher-level skills.

1.6 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are also used as a reference point in forms of review conducted by QAA.<sup>3</sup> Review teams examine the means used by degree-awarding bodies to ensure that their qualifications are of an academic standard<sup>4</sup> at least consistent with those set out in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications, and that they exercise their powers in a proper manner. In particular, review teams look at how degree-awarding bodies check the alignment between the academic standards of their qualifications and the levels defined in the relevant UK framework for higher education qualifications (see Expectation A1 of the Quality Code). In this regard, the frameworks should be regarded as reference points, not as straitjackets.

1.7 All qualifications awarded for programmes commencing in or after 2001 in Scotland and 2003 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are expected to be in accordance with the relevant framework for higher education qualifications.

1.8 The frameworks are also 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.

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

- frameworks for school and vocational qualifications (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) managed by the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulation (Ofqual)<sup>5</sup>: the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)
- an integrated overarching credit and qualifications framework in Scotland, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF),<sup>6</sup> (of which the FQHEIS is a constituent part)
- the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW),<sup>7</sup> (of which the FHEQ is an integral part).

See paragraph 2.9 for further information about the relationship between the credit and qualifications frameworks for the UK.

1.10 Increasingly, higher education providers, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration<sup>8</sup> and thus align with *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (QF-EHEA).<sup>9</sup> As such, the labels used to distinguish the different levels of the QF-EHEA

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<sup>3</sup> Further information on QAA review methods can be accessed at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/Pages/default.aspx).

<sup>4</sup> **Threshold academic standards** are 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 qualifications descriptors set out in the national frameworks for higher education qualifications. **Academic standards** are the standards that individual degree-awarding bodies set and maintain for the award of their academic credit or qualifications. These may exceed the threshold academic standards.

<sup>5</sup> Further information about Ofqual can be accessed at: <http://ofqual.gov.uk>.

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

<sup>7</sup> Further information about the CQFW can be accessed at: [www.cqfw.net](http://www.cqfw.net).

<sup>8</sup> See: [www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=8](http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=8).

<sup>9</sup> Further information on *A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* can be accessed at: [www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf).

(short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) have also been incorporated into the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications. Paragraphs 2.10-2.14 provide further information about the relationship between the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications and the QF-EHEA. A *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF)<sup>10</sup> has also been agreed by the European Commission and the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are compatible with this.

1.11 Section 2 of this document describes the main features of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications. Section 3 describes how qualifications are defined and Section 4 contains the qualification descriptors. Sections 5 and 6 set out how degree-awarding bodies are expected to implement the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications.

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<sup>10</sup> Further information about the EQF can be accessed at: [http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm).

## 2 Main features of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications

### The purposes

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

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

- provide important points of reference (as a component of *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards* of the Quality Code) for higher education providers and their external examiners when setting and assessing academic standards
- promote a shared and common understanding of the demands and outcomes associated with typical qualifications by facilitating 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.

### An outcomes-based approach to qualifications

2.3 The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications are outcomes-based structures based on qualification descriptors and a consistent qualification nomenclature. These concepts are used consistently throughout the UK higher education sector. The descriptors of levels and qualifications, while setting out clear and meaningful reference points, are nevertheless generic descriptors.

### The levels

2.4 The FHEQ and the FQHEIS are qualifications frameworks. These are formal structures which have a number of different framework levels. These describe the outcomes of progressively more challenging learning (and typical qualifications) in ascending order. Framework levels facilitate understanding of how higher education qualifications at different framework levels relate to each other and assist in comparison of different types of qualifications at the same framework level both within and between frameworks such as the QCF/NQF, CQFW and the SCQF. 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.

2.5 Each framework level is illustrated by, and each qualification is determined by reference to, a qualification descriptor for that level (see Sections 3 and 4). The qualification descriptors reflect distinct levels of intellectual achievement associated with the typical higher education qualifications awarded by UK degree-awarding bodies.

2.6 At the postgraduate levels, the FHEQ and the FQHEIS have common structures, qualification titles and qualification descriptors. Below the postgraduate levels, the honours degree level in Scotland (SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS) and level 6 in the FHEQ are in

alignment. Below this, the frameworks reflect the particular features of the different educational structures and contexts.

2.7 The FHEQ has five framework levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. The FQHEIS has six framework levels, four of which are undergraduate and two postgraduate. 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 7).

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

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

## **Relationship between the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications and European developments**

2.10 Within the QF-EHEA, the term 'cycle' is used to describe the three sequential levels identified by the Bologna Process.<sup>12</sup> These are first cycle (which can include short cycle qualifications - see paragraph 2.12), second cycle and third cycle, within which all European higher education qualifications are located. In broad terms, the first cycle corresponds to undergraduate awards (typically bachelor's degrees) and the second and third cycles correspond to postgraduate qualifications (typically master's degrees and doctoral degrees, respectively).

2.11 Like the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, the QF-EHEA has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle, known as the 'Dublin descriptors'.<sup>13</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.

2.12 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 (within the first cycle) awards. 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> *Qualifications can cross boundaries* can be accessed at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/qualifications-can-cross-boundaries.aspx).

<sup>12</sup> Bologna Process-European Higher Education Area: [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)

<sup>13</sup> The Dublin descriptors were originally developed by the Joint Quality Initiative

(JQI) in 2004. 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).

2.13 Table 1 indicates the relationship between the **levels** of the two UK frameworks for higher education qualifications and the **cycles** of the QF-EHEA. For the purpose of this document, the term 'levels' will be used throughout.

A complementary approach, used by some other frameworks within the UK and Ireland, is to use credit level descriptors to determine the relative intellectual demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy associated with a particular level of learning and achievement (see Section 6, paragraphs 6.9-6.14).



**Table 1: Examples of the typical higher education qualifications at levels of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications 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 within each level	FHEQ	FQHEIS	Corresponding QF-EHEA cycle
	level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	
Doctoral degrees (eg, PhD/DPhil, EdD, DBA, DClInPsy) <sup>c</sup>	8	12	Third cycle <b>(end of cycle)</b> Qualifications
Master's degrees (eg, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	11	Second cycle <b>(end of cycle)</b> 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; BDS, MChD/BChD; BVSc, BVMS)			
Postgraduate diplomas			
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) <sup>e</sup> /Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) <sup>f</sup>			
Postgraduate certificates			
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg BA/BSc Hons)	6	10	First cycle <b>(end of cycle)</b> Qualifications
Bachelor's degrees			
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland <sup>e</sup>			
Graduate diplomas			
Graduate certificates			
Foundation degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc)	5	8	Short cycle <b>(within or linked to the first cycle)</b> qualifications
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)			
Higher National Diplomas (HND) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson <sup>g</sup>			
Higher National Certificates (HNC) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson <sup>g</sup>	4		
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)			

## 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* and *The Qualifications and Credit Framework* (NQF/QCF).

<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> 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 which 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 which are set level 6 of the FHEQ and align with the FHEQ qualification descriptor at level 6. The full statement may be accessed at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/Pages/Statement-on-the-PGCE-Qualification.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/Qualifications/Pages/Statement-on-the-PGCE-Qualification.aspx).

<sup>f</sup> In Scotland, the qualification equivalent to the Postgraduate Certificate in Education is the Postgraduate Diploma in Education.

<sup>g</sup> HNCs and HNDs are also awarded by Pearson and SQA. These are located at levels 4 and 5 respectively on the [QCF/NQF](#) when awarded by Pearson and at levels 7 and 8 respectively on the [SCQF](#) when awarded by SQA. They are not qualifications of degree-awarding bodies.

### 3 Defining qualifications

3.1 Qualification descriptors exemplify the general nature and outcomes of the main qualifications at each framework level, and make clear how these differ from other qualifications, both at that level and at other levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications. However, the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications have the flexibility to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises.

3.2 Qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part is of particular relevance to degree-awarding bodies in designing, approving 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 outcomes.

3.3 The second part of the descriptor is a statement of the wider abilities that a typical student might 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.

3.4 Each qualification descriptor sets out the outcomes for the typical qualification 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 usually a degree. Paragraphs 6.15-6.26 specify the titling conventions for qualifications at all levels and specifically for the use of the title 'degree' for both undergraduate and postgraduate awards.

3.5 At most levels there is more than one type of qualification that may be achieved. Short programmes are often offered as continuing professional development opportunities. The qualification descriptors provide points of reference that help providers determine at which level of the relevant UK framework for higher education qualifications any qualifications resulting from such programmes should be placed. The titling conventions of qualifications (paragraphs 6.15-6.26) are used to determine an appropriate title.

3.6 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 section 5) or European developments, for example arising from the Bologna Process.

## 4 Qualification descriptors

This section sets 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.

### **Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 4 on the FHEQ: Certificate of Higher Education**

4.1 The descriptor provided for this level is for any Certificate of Higher Education, which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor may 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.

4.1.1 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.

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

### **General**

4.2 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 *Chapter A2: Degree-awarding bodies' reference points for academic standards* of the Quality Code.)

### **Characteristic outcomes of Certificates of Higher Education**

- 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.

## **Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5 on the FHEQ: foundation degree**

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

4.3.1 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>14</sup>

4.3.2 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.

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

**General**

4.4 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.

**Characteristic outcomes of the Diploma of Higher Education**

- 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.

<sup>14</sup> The *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* (2004) can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx).

- 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.

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

4.5 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 4.8.6). The bachelor's (non-honours) degree in Scotland is a recognised entry requirement to a number of professions across the UK.

**Characteristic outcomes of the degree**

- 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.

**Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6 on the FHEQ: bachelor's degree with honours**

4.6 The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any bachelor's degree with honours which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other 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.

4.6.1 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.

4.6.2 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.

4.7 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 awards with titles such as Bachelor of Arts, BA (Hons) or Bachelor of Science, BSc (Hons). In addition to bachelor's degrees at this level are short courses and professional 'conversion' courses, based largely on undergraduate material, and taken usually by those who are already graduates in another discipline, leading to, for example, graduate certificates or graduate diplomas.

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

#### **General**

4.8 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 4.8.6). The honours degree is the recognised 'normal' entry requirement to postgraduate study and to many professions across the UK.

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

- 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.

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

4.9 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 can 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.

4.8.1 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.

4.8.2 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).

4.8.3 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.

4.8.4 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).

4.8.5 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.

4.10 In Scotland a small number of universities have a long tradition of labelling certain first degrees as 'MA'. This title reflects historic Scottish custom and practice; there is no implication that the outcomes of the programme are at SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS.

4.11 The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are not academic qualifications. The MA is normally granted, on application, to graduates of these universities with a bachelor'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.

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

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

4.9.1 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.

4.9.2 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.

4.9.3 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.

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

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

4.9.6 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 academic staff of several years' standing.

## 5 Using qualification descriptors

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

5.1 **Qualification descriptors** are generic statements of the intended outcomes of study. Many academic programmes aim to develop general and specific skills. These are not explicitly addressed in the qualification descriptors as many skills, and the extent to which they need to be developed, are subject or profession specific. As such, they are addressed more appropriately in subject benchmark statements and individual programme learning outcomes.

5.2 More detailed statements on the intended outcomes in particular subjects can be found in **subject benchmark statements** (see *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards* of the Quality Code).<sup>15</sup> These 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 Additional guidance on **qualification characteristics** is provided in:

QAA (2011): *Doctoral degree characteristics*

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Doctoral\\_characteristics.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Doctoral_characteristics.aspx)

QAA (2010): *Master's degree characteristics*

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Masters-degree-characteristics.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Masters-degree-characteristics.aspx)

QAA (2010): *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx)

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).

### The relationship between qualification descriptors and degree-awarding bodies' own reference points (see *Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards of the Quality Code*)

5.5 For each individual programme of study, specific statements about the intended learning outcomes are drawn up and approved by the degree-awarding body which is

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<sup>15</sup> Information about subject benchmark statements may be accessed at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx)

[www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statements.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/subject-guidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statements.aspx)

awarding the qualification. These form part of the definitive record (see *Chapter A2: Degree-awarding bodies reference points for academic standards* of the Quality Code).

5.6 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 *Part C: Information about higher education provision* of the Quality Code.

## 6 Responsibilities of degree-awarding bodies

### Positioning qualifications at levels on the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications

6.1 Degree-awarding bodies are responsible for demonstrating that each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the relevant UK framework for higher education qualifications. In allocating the appropriate level for a qualification, degree-awarding bodies consider:

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

6.2 When designing and approving programmes, higher education providers ensure that the learning experience delivered is coherent and that due consideration is given to *Chapter B1: Programme design, development and approval* of the Quality Code.<sup>16</sup> In addition, higher education providers take account of the regulatory and other requirements of any PSRBs which recognise or accredit specific programmes for professional purposes.

6.3 Not all higher education qualifications meet the qualification descriptors in full. For example, Table 1 lists the typical higher education qualifications at each framework level but not all of the qualifications at each level meet all of the expectations of the qualification descriptor. The qualifications are differentiated by the volume of learning and this in turn leads to variation in the range of intended learning outcomes. Some qualifications (for instance foundation degrees) have been specifically designed to facilitate progression to subsequent levels. Section 4 provides further information about the qualification descriptor for each level of the framework and gives examples of qualifications that meet each descriptor in full, and where the qualification descriptor can be used as a reference point for other qualifications at the same framework level.

6.4 Further specifications, designed to assist degree-awarding bodies in achieving consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, nature and subjects of study is provided in paragraphs 6.15-6.26.

### Assessment of learning outcomes

6.5 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 learning outcomes. Degree-awarding bodies ensure that qualifications are awarded only where the relevant learning outcomes have been achieved in this way. See *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 B7: External examining* of the Quality Code.

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<sup>16</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode).



## Awarding qualifications

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

6.7 A student who has failed to achieve the required 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 outcomes required for that (lower) qualification.

6.8 Degree-awarding bodies ensure that:

- the outcomes required for each of their programmes and qualifications are specified clearly
- achievement of those outcomes 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 outcomes being demonstrated.

See also *Chapter A3: Securing academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to academic awards* and *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning* of the Quality Code.

## Qualifications, volumes of learning and credit

6.9 Degree-awarding bodies are able to demonstrate that the design of programmes facilitates academic and intellectual progression. However, it is for providers to decide how this is best demonstrated, whether by a credit structure or otherwise. There is no assumption that progression through a programme should be demonstrated by reference to the descriptors of outcomes of intermediate qualifications, if these are not offered by the higher education provider. It is not the purpose of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications to prescribe the internal organisation of academic programmes.

6.10 Designers of 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. The UK frameworks for higher education qualifications do not themselves specify minimum or typical volumes of learning by reference to units of credit.

6.11 The outcomes associated with a qualification are understood in a holistic way, and their achievement is demonstrated directly. However, different qualifications within the same level may have different volumes of learning which lead to a different range of learning outcomes. For example, a 'degree' can properly be awarded only when the expectations of the relevant qualification descriptor have been met or exceeded. Within a 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. See paragraph 6.20 on the use of the title 'degree'.

6.12 The FHEQ is a qualifications framework, based on the outcomes represented by the main qualification titles. It is not a credit framework, nor is it dependent on the use of credit. Nevertheless, credit is widely used by higher education providers in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales. In England and Northern Ireland a higher education credit framework has been agreed and all degree-awarding bodies that award credit are expected

to use this.<sup>17</sup> In Wales, the FHEQ is an integral part of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)<sup>18</sup>, which is a meta-framework for credit and qualifications embracing all educational sectors and all higher education providers have agreed to use this.

6.13 Similarly, the FQHEIS is a qualifications framework and is embedded within the overarching Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)<sup>19</sup> which includes all educational sectors. The credit arrangements in the SCQF apply to all degree-awarding bodies in Scotland.

6.14 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 respective UK frameworks 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). 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.

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<sup>17</sup> *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* can be accessed at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-england-augu.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/higher-education-credit-framework-for-england-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-england-augu.aspx).

<sup>18</sup> Further information about the CQFW can be accessed at: [www.cqfw.net/](http://www.cqfw.net/).

<sup>19</sup> Further information about the SCQF can be accessed at: [www.scqf.org.uk/](http://www.scqf.org.uk/)

## Titling conventions for qualifications

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

6.16 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 also Expectation A1 of the Quality Code.

### Level

6.17 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 '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
- 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.

6.18 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 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.
- Diplomas and certificates at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the FQHEIS are at the same level but differentiated from each other by volume of study and learning outcomes; they are titled postgraduate diplomas and certificates (see paragraph 6.23).
- Diplomas and certificates at level 6 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 10 on the FQHEIS are likewise at the same level but differentiated from each other by volume of study and learning outcomes; they are titled graduate diplomas and certificates.
- 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 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.

6.19 A qualification from a non-degree programme, having outcomes that correspond to some aspects of a qualification descriptor, might be placed at the same level as the main qualification to which that descriptor refers. For example, a programme may have outcomes requiring the demonstration of understanding and critical awareness of some current problems at the forefront of an area of professional practice, but not a practical understanding of techniques of research. A degree-awarding body might reasonably determine that the qualification should be at level 7 on the FHEQ/SCQF level 11 on the

FQHEIS. In this instance, the title 'postgraduate diploma' or 'postgraduate certificate' may be used.

### **Nature of study**

6.20 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*.

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

6.22 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.

### **Volume of study**

6.23 The title diploma generally indicate a smaller volume of learning than a degree but a larger volume than certificates (and an associated differentiation in the range of intended learning outcomes) but see paragraph 6.18. When used with the stems 'graduate' or 'postgraduate', 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).

### **Field of study**

6.24 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).

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

6.26 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, Research, Development and Partnerships	QAA (Chair)
Sarah Clark	Dean of Quality and Standards/Director of Academic Office	University of Wales, Trinity St David
Dr Kirsty Conlon	Head of Learning and Teaching and Widening Access	Universities Scotland
Nick Davy	HE Policy Manager	Association of Colleges (AoC)
Lysander De-la Haye	Director of Quality, Newman University	Guild HE
Dr Melinda Drowley	Interim Director, Research Development and Partnerships	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
Dr David Gale	Assistant Director, Research, Development and Partnerships	QAA
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
Professor Denise McAlister	Pro Vice Chancellor	University of Ulster
John O'Connor	National Framework Qualifications Development	Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
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## **Annex B: Shared Dublin descriptors for short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle awards<sup>20</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>21</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>20</sup> Previously referred to as bachelor's, master's and doctoral awards.

<sup>21</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 and 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>22</sup> approach to their work or vocation, and have competences<sup>23</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>24</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

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<sup>22</sup> The word '**professional**' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile/specification.

<sup>23</sup> The word '**competence**' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a 'yes/no' assessment.

<sup>24</sup> The word '**research**' is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The word is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing, and other creative arts. It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to a traditional 'scientific method'.

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

**From 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: Table of credit values (typically associated with the design of programmes leading to main HE qualifications) for England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland

This table is only an illustration of credit arrangements across the four jurisdictions of the UK. 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/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Augu.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Higher-education-credit-framework-for-England-guidance-on-academic-credit-arrangements-in-higher-education-in-England-Augu.aspx)

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 which are typically associated with the qualification (plus any permissible minimum or maximum at a specified level shown in parantheses). In many cases the credits for qualifications will exceed the minimum.

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ Level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	England/NI	Scotland	Wales
PhD/DPhil	8	12	Not typically credit-rated		
Professional doctorates (only if credit based) (EdB, 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	7	11	Not typically credit-rated		180 (150 at FHEQ level 7 and a max of 30 at FHEQ level 6)
Taught Master's Degree(eg, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, 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)

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ Level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	England/NI	Scotland	Wales
Primary (or first) qualifications in medicine, (eg, BMBS), dentistry (BDS) and veterinary science	7	11	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 CQFW level 3)
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)			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)
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)
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 at 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 at 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)	

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ Level <sup>a</sup>	SCQF level <sup>b</sup>	England/NI	Scotland	Wales
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)	5	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 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 )
Higher National Certificates (HNC awarded by DABs 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 and The Qualifications and Credit Framework (NQF/QCF).

**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.

## Annex D: Glossary of abbreviations

CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
EQF	European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FQHEIS	Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland
PSRBs	Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
QF-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

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