Executive summary
A brief guide to academic qualifications

The higher education qualifications awarded by universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are at five levels. In ascending order, these are the Certificate, Intermediate, Honours, Masters and Doctoral levels. Certificate level

The holder 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. He or she will be able to communicate accurately, and will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

The Certificate may be a first step towards obtaining higher level qualifications. Intermediate level

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, enabling them to perform effectively in their chosen field.

They will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

The intermediate level includes ordinary (non-Honours) degrees, the Foundation degree, Diplomas of Higher Education, and other higher diplomas. Honours level

An Honours graduate 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 graduate will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The graduate will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate effectively.

An Honours graduate should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.

Honours degrees form the largest group of higher education qualifications. Typical courses last for three years (if taken full-time) and lead to a Bachelors degree with Honours, having a title such as Bachelor of Arts (BA(Hons)) or Bachelor of Science (BSc(Hons)). Also 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 Graduate Certificates or Graduate Diplomas. Masters level
Much of the study undertaken at Masters level will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Students will have shown originality in the application of knowledge, and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They will be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they will show originality in tackling and solving problems.

They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative, in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

Masters degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses, programmes of research, or a mixture of both. Longer, research-based programmes often lead to the degree of MPhil. Most Masters courses last at least one year (if taken full-time), and are taken by persons with Honours degrees (or equivalent achievement). Some Masters degrees in science and engineering are awarded after extended undergraduate programmes that last, typically, a year longer than Honours degree programmes. Also at this level are advanced short courses, often forming parts of Continuing Professional Development programmes, leading to Postgraduate Certificates and Postgraduate Diplomas.

(Note: the MAs granted by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are not academic qualifications.)

Doctoral level

Doctorates are awarded for the creation and interpretation of knowledge, which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research. Holders of doctorates will be able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding.

Holders of doctorates will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, and innovation in tackling and solving problems.

The titles PhD and DPhil are commonly used for doctorates awarded on the basis of original research. Doctoral programmes, that may include a research component, but which have a substantial taught element lead usually to awards that include the name of the discipline in their title (eg EdD for Doctor of Education). A doctorate normally requires the equivalent of three years' full-time study. Further information

* Full descriptors of a qualification at each level can be found in Annex 1.
* More detailed statements of graduate attributes are set out in subject benchmark statements produced for broad subject areas, at Honours level, and at other levels where there are substantial numbers of taught courses in the subject.
* For each course, the providing university or college writes a programme specification, setting out in detail the knowledge, understanding and skills that the successful student should acquire.
* The achievements of individual students are recorded in personal progress files.

Guidance on the implementation of the framework for higher education qualifications Introduction

This guidance is about the implementation of the framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates) granted by a university or college in the exercise of its degree awarding powers.

The guidance is in two parts. The first part deals with the general purpose and main features of the framework. The second part deals with more specific implementation issues, and uses the format of the Agency's Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. The guidance does not have the status of a section of that Code, but it is intended that it will be reviewed in the light of experience, with a view to making it a section of the Code in 2003. Part 1: The framework The purpose of the framework
Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications. The qualifications framework is designed to ensure a consistent use of qualification titles.

The main purposes of the framework are:

- to enable employers, schools, parents, prospective students and others to understand the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles;
- to maintain international comparability of standards, especially in the European context, to ensure international competitiveness, and to facilitate student and graduate mobility;
- to assist learners to identify potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning;
- to assist higher education institutions, their external examiners, and the Agency’s reviewers, by providing important points of reference for setting and assessing standards.

The number of levels in the framework

The framework has five levels; three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate.

In common parlance, each stage within any framework of qualifications, be it school, vocational or higher education, is referred to as a 'level'. In practice, most such levels represent bands of qualifications sharing similar outcomes.

To convey the relative position of these levels it is convenient to number them 1 to 5. However, there is a need to avoid confusion with the numbering of levels in the framework of school and vocational qualifications managed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), and with the numbered levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. Also, it is necessary to make it clear that, despite different numberings, at Honours level and above there is equivalence between the frameworks for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and for Scotland. As such, levels will normally be referred to by the initial letter of the descriptive title, with the same letters (H, M and D) being used for the equivalent levels in both higher education qualifications frameworks. The levels are:

1 Certificate C level Certificates of Higher Education
2 Intermediate I level Foundation degrees, ordinary (Bachelors) degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education and other higher diplomas
3 Honours H level Bachelors degrees with Honours, Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas
4 Masters M level Masters degrees, Postgraduate Certificates and Postgraduate Diplomas
5 Doctoral D level Doctorates

Qualification descriptors

Descriptors exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level, and demonstrate the nature of change between levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level, and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications. However, the framework has the flexibility to accommodate diversity and innovation, and to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises. It should be regarded as a framework, not as a straightjacket.

Qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part will be of particular interest to those designing, approving and reviewing academic programmes. They will need to be satisfied that, for any programme, the curriculum and assessments provide all students with the opportunity to achieve, and to demonstrate achievement of, the outcomes.
The second part is a statement of the wider abilities that the typical student could be expected to have developed. It will be of assistance to employers, and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of the qualification.

Each descriptor sets out the outcomes for the main qualification at each level, usually a degree. At some levels there may be more than one type of qualification. The Agency will keep under review the need for any additional qualification descriptors at these levels, in the light of the development of other points of reference, such as benchmark statements.

Short courses are often offered as parts of programmes of continuing professional development. The qualification descriptors provide points of reference that will help institutions determine at which level of the framework any qualifications resulting from such courses should be placed. The guidance on nomenclature may be used to determine an appropriate title.

The title 'degree' should be used only in respect of qualifications at Intermediate, Honours, Masters and Doctoral levels, which are awarded for achievement of the full outcomes set out in the relevant descriptor. A qualification from a short, non-degree programme, having outcomes that correspond to some aspects of a descriptor, might be placed at the same level as the main qualification to which that descriptor refers. For example, a short course might have outcomes requiring the demonstration of understanding and critical awareness of some current problems at the forefront of an area of professional practice, but not a practical understanding of techniques of research. An institution might reasonably determine that the qualification should be at M level. The title 'Postgraduate Diploma' or 'Postgraduate Certificate' could be used.

The Intermediate level is deliberately broad, and is likely to encompass a range of qualifications. It is in this area that many new developments in higher education are likely to occur. A broad category provides flexibility for initiatives such as the Foundation degree in England, and space for the development of new, occupationally related qualifications. The relationship of qualification descriptors to other points of reference for academic standards

Qualification descriptors are generic statements of the outcomes of study. Further guidance on the expectations for degrees in particular subjects can be found in subject benchmark statements. These have been produced for the Honours level, and will be produced for other levels, where there is significant taught provision in a subject.

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

Many academic programmes aim to develop general and specific skills. These are not explicitly addressed in the qualification descriptors, as many skills, and the extent to which they need to be developed, are discipline or profession specific. As such, they are addressed more appropriately in subject benchmark statements and individual programme specifications. Qualifications, volumes of learning, and credit

The framework is a qualifications framework, based upon the outcomes represented by the main qualification titles. It is not a credit framework, nor is it dependent on the use of credit.

Providers of higher education programmes need to be able to demonstrate how the design of curricula secures academic and intellectual progression. However, it is for providers to decide how this is best demonstrated, whether by a credit structure or otherwise. There is no assumption that internal progression should be, or is best, demonstrated by reference to the descriptors of outcomes of intermediate qualifications not necessarily used by the institution. It is not the purpose of the framework to prescribe the internal organisation of academic programmes.
The design of academic programmes has to make some assumptions about the amount of learning that is likely to be necessary to achieve the intended outcomes. In some cases this will be expressed in terms of study time, for example a number of academic years. In other cases this will be expressed through credit rating.

For any qualification, study leading directly to the qualification will normally build upon learning from earlier stages of a course of study, or from other assessed prior learning.

Within an overall programme, the learning outcomes required for a degree are unlikely to be achieved in less than the equivalent of one academic year's full-time study, which addresses those outcomes directly. For example, an extended undergraduate programme might have units of Masters level credit equivalent to study over one half of an academic year. That is unlikely to be sufficient to enable a student to match fully the expectations of the Masters degree descriptor, in which case an Honours degree would be the appropriate award for successful completion of the programme. Achievement of the full Masters outcomes would be needed for the award of a Masters degree. Similarly, an ordinary degree programme that offered units of Honours level work equivalent to half a year's study only, would be unlikely to enable a student to demonstrate achievement of full Honours level outcomes.

A degree can properly be awarded only when the expectations of the relevant qualification descriptor have been met or exceeded.

A programme leading to a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma might have some M level outcomes, but use of the Postgraduate title for the award would be justified only if most or all of the outcomes were assessed at M level.

The qualifications framework itself does not specify minimum or typical volumes of learning by reference to units of credit. Not all institutions use credit arrangements, and there is no single credit structure that is of universal application. The outcomes associated with a qualification should be understood in an holistic way, and their achievement should be demonstrated directly.

Assessment

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

See also Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students and especially precept 11 dealing with compensation and condonation; and Code of practice, Section 4: External examining and especially precept 1 dealing with general principles. Implementation timetable

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

Accordingly, there will be an implementation date based on the time when programmes commence. Institutions should be able to demonstrate that all students commencing programmes after that date would gain, on successful completion, qualifications that were awarded in accordance with the framework.

The implementation date is the start of the academic year 2003-04. Use of the framework in academic review
The framework will provide reference points that may be used to determine whether the intended outcomes for programmes, and actual student achievement, are appropriate to the level of the qualification awarded. See the Handbook for academic review (the Handbook), and especially paragraphs 32 and 82. Reviewers will also assess whether curriculum design is effective in achieving intended programme outcomes (the Handbook, paragraph 83). In this context, institutions should be able to demonstrate that the volume and nature of learning is adequate to achieve the outcomes indicated by the framework. Claims that those outcomes can be achieved from volumes of learning that are significantly below those found necessary by institutions generally, are likely to be tested by reviewers with particular thoroughness. Part 2: Specific guidelines

These guidelines take the form of a series of precepts and accompanying outline guidance. The precepts identify key matters that an institution should be able to demonstrate that it is addressing effectively through its own quality assurance mechanisms. The accompanying outline guidance is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but for many institutions it will constitute appropriate good practice. Awarding qualifications

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

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

Institutions should ensure that:

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

Positioning qualifications within the framework

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

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

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

Naming qualifications

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

In naming qualifications, institutions should:

* use the title ‘degree’ only for a qualification that meets in full the expectations of a qualification descriptor at levels I, H, M, or D;
Annex 1
Qualification descriptors
Descriptor for a qualification at Certificate (C) level: Certificate of Higher Education

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

i 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;

ii an ability to present, evaluate, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, 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:

a evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their
   area(s) of study and/or work;

b communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and
   coherent arguments;

c undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment;

and will have:

d qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some
   personal responsibility. Descriptor for a qualification at Intermediate (I) level: Degree (non-
   Honours)

Non-Honours degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

i 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;

ii 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;

iii knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically
   the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study;

iv 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:

a use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information,
   and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis;

b 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;
c undertake further training, develop existing skills, and acquire new competences that will enable
them to assume significant responsibility within organisations;

and will have:

d qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal
responsibility and decision-making. Descriptor for a qualification at Honours (H) level: Bachelors
degree with Honours

Honours degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

i 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;

ii an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;

iii 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; and
    * to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or
equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;

iv an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;

v the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary
sources (eg refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

a 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;

b 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;

c communicate information, ideas, problems, and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist
audiences;

and will have:

d qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:

    * the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
    * decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts; and
    * the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or
equivalent nature.

Descriptor for a qualification at Masters (M) level: Masters degree

Masters degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:
i a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice;

ii a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship;

iii originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline;

iv conceptual understanding that enables the student:

* to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; and

* to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

a deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;

b demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level;

c continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level;

and will have:

d the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:

* the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
* decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations; and
* the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

Descriptor for qualifications at Doctoral (D) level: Doctoral degree

Doctorates are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

i the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication;

ii a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice;

iii the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;

iv a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.
Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

a make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences;

b continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches;

and will have:

c the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments. Annex 2 Qualification nomenclature

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

* The titles 'Honours', 'Master' and 'Doctor' should be used only for qualifications that meet in full the expectations of the qualification descriptors at H, M and D levels respectively.

* Titles with the stem 'Postgraduate' (eg Postgraduate Diploma) should be restricted to qualifications where the learning outcomes of the programme of study match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at M level or above.

* Titles with the stem 'Graduate' (eg Graduate Diploma) may be used for qualifications from programmes of study that typically require graduate entry or its equivalent, and have learning outcomes that match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at H level.

Nature

* The title 'degree' should be used only for a qualification that meets in full the expectations of a qualification descriptor at levels I, H, M or D.

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

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

* When used with the stems 'Graduate' or 'Postgraduate', the title 'Certificate' should normally signify study equivalent to at least one-third of an academic year, and the title 'Diploma' should normally signify study equivalent to at least two-thirds of an academic year.

Subject

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

* Qualification titles that reflect the subject focus of programmes of study in two disciplines (eg a joint Honours award) should consider nomenclatures based on:
  o 'A and B', where there is an approximately equal balance between two components;
  o 'A with B' for a major/minor combination where the minor subject accounts for at least a quarter of the programme.

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