



*Promoting higher quality*

*The Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education*

The national qualifications framework for higher education qualifications  
in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: a position paper

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## *Background*

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) has the responsibility for putting into effect one of the central recommendations of the 1997 Dearing report on higher education: the construction of two inter-linked frameworks for higher education qualifications (one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and one for Scotland). After two years of development and consultation, this work is now approaching its conclusion.

2 This paper sets out the position the Agency is minded to adopt as a basis for the establishment of a National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A parallel paper is being published on the Scottish framework. This position will be confirmed, or modified in the light of comment on this paper, by the Agency's Board in October 2000. The frameworks will then be published in their final form and the period for their implementation will commence.

3 The Agency invites comments on the position described herein. Many of the issues have been shaped by the two major consultations already carried out. Some details, in particular the draft qualification descriptors and the associated descriptors of the defining characteristics of learning at each level, have not previously been published. The issues on which comment would be particularly welcomed are listed at the end of the paper.

### *Why is the framework for higher education qualifications being introduced?*

4 The framework is being introduced as one of a number of measures designed to promote public understanding of, and confidence in academic standards. Related measures include subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and progress files. The qualifications framework is designed to provide:

- clear and accurate information about the purposes and outcomes of UK higher education in a form that will be useful to all of its stakeholders;
- a structure of shared, explicit reference points by which to distinguish the character, level and intended outcomes of higher education qualifications;
- the basis for a consistent use of qualifications titles within higher education.

5 The framework thus addresses an external audience of employers, students and overseas institutions who need reliable information about higher education qualifications. It addresses also an internal audience of those who design and approve programmes, and who must ensure that appropriate standards are maintained; and those who evaluate standards, be they external examiners or the Agency's academic reviewers.

6 In an open, expanding and diverse higher education system, the need for clear public information, shared points of reference and consistency of nomenclature assumes a new importance.

7 There is a need for assurance about the standards of qualifications awarded. The Dearing Committee drew attention to the problems that have arisen at the Masters level from 'a market system operating during a period of increased demand for postgraduate qualifications, without an adequate framework or control mechanism'. It was observed that the problem of reliance on a market system is that, by the time the market has corrected the worst examples of ambiguous standards, damage may be done to the whole of higher education. The report observed that the experience at the Masters level provided: 'a salutary warning for undergraduate education'. If market influences were introduced 'without an adequate framework or mechanism to ensure the consistent use of titles and corresponding level of award, great damage could be done.'

8 A clear and explicit framework will facilitate comparisons with occupational qualifications within the UK, and with higher education qualifications in other countries. Increasingly, higher education institutions, students and employers operate and compete internationally. This highlights the need for reliable information about UK qualifications, not least because of the requirements of the Bologna Declaration on European higher education, to which the UK is one of 29 signatories. The Declaration commits the UK to, among other things, the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees and a clear differentiation between undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

9 Within the UK much effort is being made to widen participation, to strengthen vocational programmes, and to improve the overall flexibility and coherence of education and training. The qualifications taken by school leavers are being reformed. Many of these initiatives will require clearer articulation between higher education and other programmes of education and training. All increase the need for higher education qualifications to be clearly and consistently specified and named.

10 Most employers do not understand higher education qualifications. In a survey of employers, undertaken recently on behalf of the Agency, some 81 per cent reported that they had difficulty understanding the meaning of various qualifications awarded by UK higher education institutions. The framework will make it easier to explain to employers, and others, what has been achieved by the holder of a named qualification, and what might be expected of them in their future roles.

11 The framework, together with programme specifications, will also help professional and statutory bodies to gauge how different higher education qualifications may contribute to professional formation. In general, routes for progression will be clarified and facilitated.

#### *Developing the position on the qualifications framework*

12 The Agency has undertaken two major consultation exercises on the principles and policies that should underpin the framework; the responses to both were numerous and considered.

13 There is broad agreement about the need for the framework. It is recognised that the scale, complexity and diversity of UK higher education, and the competitive environment in which UK higher education institutions operate, require institutions to agree and work within a common structure for managing and identifying the types and titles of qualifications. There is also a growing realisation of the potential impact in the UK of international agreements, such as the 1997 Lisbon convention on recognition of academic qualifications, and the 1999 Bologna Declaration.

14 The framework, once introduced, must apply to all higher education institutions. It would be unfair, in a competitive market, if some institutions were to work outside it, for example by using qualification titles that imply a higher level of achievement than is the case. However, for the framework to have this universal applicability it must be able to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises, it should recognise and facilitate diversity and innovation, and it should promote a wider understanding of UK qualifications internationally. It is a framework, not a straightjacket.

#### *The introduction of the framework*

15 If the aims of the framework are to be achieved, it is inevitable that some current practices will need to be modified. If there is to be a new clarity and consistency in the use of qualification titles and the understanding they convey, practices that have developed in an apparently *ad hoc* manner will need to be reviewed, and in some cases revised. An appropriate transitional period will be provided to ensure that the necessary changes can be identified, planned and implemented by each institution. The reasonable expectations of students currently enrolled on programmes leading to named awards must also be respected.

16 The Agency will finalise the framework in October 2000. That will coincide with the introduction of the new academic review method and the start of a six-year review cycle. The six years of the cycle should be a sufficient period to enable institutions to ensure that they are awarding qualifications in line with the framework. Accordingly, from October 2006 there will be an expectation that all higher education qualifications are awarded in accordance with the principles of the framework. During the implementation period, institutions should identify the need for any changes to their practices, and plan and implement these.

17 The length of the implementation period reflects the need to give adequate notice of any change in the status of a qualification. If in future, to conform to the framework, a programme will lead to a different qualification, such a change cannot be introduced in a way that would affect adversely any current student. Allowing for students accepting places on programmes leading to named qualifications up to a year before the programme starts, six years is a relatively short time in the case of (for example) a qualification awarded at the conclusion of a four-year programme. Institutions will need to prepare for any necessary changes at the start of the period. This will enable them to ensure that all qualifications awarded from the academic year 2006-07 onwards are in line with the expectations of the framework. For many institutions little change to existing practice might be required and they should be able to operate within the framework well before 2006.

#### *The principles underpinning the framework*

18 The key principles which underpin the framework are:

- the framework is based on defined levels, generic qualification descriptors and consistency of nomenclature and credit at those levels;
- qualifications are defined in terms of their level and the relevant generic descriptor, and have a minimum amount of credit at the level at which the qualification is awarded;
- a qualification is awarded to mark the achievement of positively defined outcomes, not as compensation for failure at a higher level, or by default;
- each module (or other element of a programme) should be defined in terms of its intended learning outcomes, its level and its credit volume. The level of the module should be determined by relating the intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria to the descriptors of characteristics of learning at each level;
- differentiation between levels is not based on the nature of the learning or scholarship involved, eg whether a programme is taught or research based;
- progression in time during a sequence of study does not necessarily entail progression to a higher level of learning;
- the nomenclature of qualifications should be consistent and provide an accurate representation of their nature;
- all properly assessed and quality assured learning, wherever or however achieved, can receive credit;
- credit should be allocated on the basis of achievement, not time served.

#### *The number of levels in the framework*

19 The framework will consist of six levels; four of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. The postgraduate levels will be the same in both the England/Wales/Northern Ireland framework, and the Scottish framework. At the highest undergraduate level - that at which honours degrees will be placed - there will be a broad equivalence of definition between the two frameworks.

20 In specifying four undergraduate levels, the Agency recognises that the framework must cater for the future, not merely reflect qualifications that are available now. Growth in higher education is likely to occur in provision below the level of the honours degree, so here it is sensible to provide for as many levels as can be distinguished meaningfully from each other. New qualifications may develop to meet the needs of employers, the demands of greater participation and the expectations of lifelong learners. These latter expectations may include qualifications that can be awarded at 'stopping off' points that fall short of a full qualification at a higher level. A greater number of levels provides increased flexibility to facilitate this.

21 Level 4 is the level of the honours degree, to which most undergraduate programmes lead. Level 3 is the level of the non-honours, or ordinary degree. It is a level not much used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at present. Nevertheless, there are such degrees available, and the Dearing Report called for growth at this level. Depending on their final specification, the Foundation Degrees proposed for introduction in England might be at this level. There are several qualifications that are generally regarded as being at level 2, including Higher National qualifications, and Diplomas in Higher Education.

22 The level of learning represented by level 1 is not exclusive to higher education. There is an overlap with levels of learning attained in some further education provision and the achievement of good Advanced level students. This overlap will become more pronounced with the introduction of the 'advanced extension' award that will be available to the most able of A level candidates. At present there are few higher education exit qualifications at this level. However, that could change over time, with increased participation in programmes below the level of honours degree, and any emerging need for intermediate qualifications to be associated with 'stopping off' points from these.

23 The Agency has specified only two postgraduate levels, the Masters and the Doctorate.

24 There are many programmes that teach undergraduate material to students who already hold a first degree. These programmes are often demanding, because they are intensive, and rely upon well-developed study skills. However, if content and assessment are at undergraduate level, the qualification must also be at that level. Qualifications gained from such programmes do not constitute an additional level between the Honours and Masters degrees.

25 The Agency considered whether there should be a 'Higher Masters' level to accommodate qualifications such as the MPhil. It was concluded that what distinguishes the MPhil from other Masters degrees is not the level of the work involved, but the volume and nature of the work. This is consistent with the view of the 1996 Harris Report that distinctions between taught and research programmes are 'more indicative of the nature than the level of study'. The title MPhil should be used for awards made in respect of higher volume Masters programmes that involve, normally, a substantial element of research or equivalent original work. Typically, such programmes would involve study over the equivalent of more than one academic year.

26 The Agency's approach to the postgraduate levels has regard to the principle of the Bologna Declaration that undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications should be clearly distinguished. If this distinction is blurred, for example by awarding Masters degrees in respect of programmes that have no postgraduate content, there is a risk that other European countries might regard all UK Masters degrees as being 'first cycle' (ie undergraduate) qualifications only. Similarly, an unintended consequence of the introduction of a 'Higher Masters' level might be that other Masters degrees would be regarded as being equivalent to 'first cycle' qualifications only. Any devaluation of the UK Masters degree in the eyes of European partners could hamper academic and professional progression within other European countries by the holders of such degrees.

27 Limiting the number of levels in the framework to six will not limit the number and nature of qualifications that may be accommodated within it. Already there are different types of qualification at the same level (eg Dip HE and HND at level 2, or taught and research postgraduate qualifications). Different types of qualification at the same level will be distinguished by purpose and character and by their volume (expressed in length of programme or credit required for their award).

28 Institutions should position each of their qualifications at one level in the framework. When determining the level in the framework at which a particular qualification should be placed (and therefore the title that should be used for the qualification) institutions will need to consider the qualification against the generic qualification descriptors, the level of the elements of the programme leading to the qualification, and the amount of credit awarded, particularly at the exit level. More specifically, institutions should consider:

- Will those awarded the qualification have demonstrated the attributes and characteristics detailed in the relevant generic qualification descriptor?
- What is the highest level of the assessed outcomes that must be demonstrated before the qualification is awarded? What is the volume of learning (measured by credit or otherwise) at this level?
- What is the overall volume of learning required for the qualification?

29 The framework will provide a common basis to enable institutions to address these issues in a consistent and comparable manner. When considering the level of a qualification it should be remembered that it is the level at which the outcomes are assessed that is the determining factor. For example, a postgraduate programme might include some introductory elements of study, initially presented at an undergraduate level but, following additional work, subsequently assessed at postgraduate level.

30 The location of typical higher education qualifications at each of the levels is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland**

Level	Typical qualifications and their <i>credit definitions</i>	
<b>HE6</b>	<b>PhD/DPhil</b> <b>not credit rated*</b>	<b>other Doctorates</b> <b>min 540 with min 450 at HE6</b>
<b>HE5</b>	<b>MPhil</b>	either <b>not credit rated*</b> or <b>graduate** entry plus</b> <b>min 300 with min 270 at HE5</b>
	<b>Masters</b>	<b>graduate** entry plus</b> <b>min 180 with min 150 at HE5</b>
	where <b>Masters</b> follows an integrated programme from undergraduate to Masters level study	<b>typically min 480 with min 150 at HE5</b>
	<b>Postgraduate Diploma</b>	<b>graduate** entry plus</b> <b>min 120 with min 90 at HE5</b>
	<b>Postgraduate Certificate</b>	<b>graduate** entry plus</b> <b>min 60 with min 40 at HE5</b>
<b>HE4</b>	<b>Bachelors degree with Hons</b> <b>min 360 normally with 120 or more at HE4</b> <b>(min 100 at HE4)</b>	title to be determined <b>graduate** entry plus min 180 at HE3</b>
<b>HE3</b>	<b>Bachelors degree</b> (non honours) <b>min 360 normally with min 120 at HE3</b>  OR <b>min 300 with min 60 at HE4</b>	<b>Graduate Diploma</b> <b>graduate** entry plus min 120 at HE3</b>  <b>Graduate Certificate</b> <b>graduate** entry plus min 60 at HE3</b>
<b>HE2</b>	<b>Diploma of HE</b> <b>min 240 normally with min 120 at HE2</b>	* programmes of work that are assessed solely by a final thesis; or by published work, artefact or performance that is accompanied by a written commentary placing it within its academic context, would not normally be credit rated  ** graduate or graduate equivalent  120 credits equate broadly to the total learning expected from a year of full-time study at undergraduate level, and 180 credits to the learning expected from full-time study during the longer postgraduate academic year. A single unit of credit is often regarded as representing the typical outcome of 10 notional hours of study.
<b>HE1</b>	<b>Certificate of HE</b> <b>min 120 normally with min 100 at HE1</b>	



## *Defining qualifications*

31 There is a healthy diversity of provision in higher education, so the framework must be capable of embracing qualifications that are structured in different ways. In particular it must be capable of being used by institutions that have formal credit accumulation systems, and those that do not. To facilitate this, the framework has both generic descriptors of whole qualifications, and descriptors of the defining characteristics of learning at each level. The latter may be of assistance in matching modules or other programme elements to levels. These two types of descriptor are designed to be complementary and thus to reinforce each other.

### *Qualification descriptors*

32 Qualification descriptors identify the typical achievements and attributes associated with whole qualifications. Descriptors must be reasonably concise, and expressed in language that is accessible by all who will use them. Most stakeholders outside higher education will find short, generic qualification descriptors, and a consistent use of the qualification title, the best indicators of the typical attributes of the holder of a qualification of a particular type and level. External stakeholders are interested primarily in the outcomes represented by a qualification, less in the inputs that make up the programme.

33 The main descriptors of level are derived from an understanding of well-established qualifications, such as the honours degree. At levels where there are fewer established qualifications, or a less consistent use of title, descriptors are derived, in part, by interpolation between more established points of reference. This approach has been preferred to one of aggregation of the credit level descriptors used by credit consortia, not least because a higher education qualification should represent more than the sum of its constituent parts. At each level, there will be a range of individual achievement above the minimum required for the award of a qualification. The qualification descriptors are intended to reflect the achievement of the typical student, that is achievement at the modal point of the range.

34 The honours degree descriptor (level 4) draws upon the common attributes identified from the 22 subject benchmark statements currently available, and from the work of the group that advised the Agency on standards in multi-disciplinary programmes. The descriptors for qualifications at levels 2 and 3 may need to be developed further in the light of current work on qualifications at these levels; for example the subject benchmarking exercise which is underway for nursing, and the specification of the Foundation Degree proposed by Government for introduction within England.

35 Descriptions of the attributes of a qualification can easily become bland, because the words which express intellectual attributes and capabilities are used at all levels. Words like 'analysis' are used to describe a level of ability appropriate to school examinations, as well as ability levels associated with higher education. These general terms need to be referenced in a manner that conveys the level of difficulty and complexity associated with degree level study. Higher education is about the creation, application and transmission of knowledge. Such knowledge changes and develops over time, so a referencing cannot be absolute.

36 Accordingly, the point of reference that is used is that of the forefront of current knowledge in a discipline, as represented by current research or equivalent advanced scholarship. Descriptors refer to how closely study approaches the frontiers of current knowledge in a discipline, and across what range of such knowledge.

37 Draft descriptors for qualifications at levels HE1-HE6 are attached at Annex 2.

### *Descriptors of the defining characteristics of learning at each level*

38 While qualification descriptors set out the attributes associated with a whole qualification, descriptors of the defining characteristics of learning at each level relate to individual modules, or elements of programmes. In this context, 'level' is an indicator of the relative demand and complexity of learning associated with a body of knowledge, understanding and skills.

39 The notion of 'level' of study or achievement is an aid to course design, a means, for example, of calibrating progression through a programme of study. It helps to ensure that the curriculum secures academic and intellectual progression by imposing increasing demands on the learner, over time, in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the capacity for conceptualisation, and increasing autonomy in learning.

40 Descriptors of the characteristics of learning enable elements of programmes to be matched to the level of achievement required for the making of an award, whether a degree or an intermediate qualification. Institutions should be able to demonstrate that each programme contains a sufficient volume of work at the level of the award to justify the making of the award.

41 The existence of brief descriptors of the learning characteristics of each level does not mean that every programme must be structured around them. Programmes may use fewer levels than exist within the undergraduate part of the framework, or may use the whole qualification descriptor as their only point of reference to the framework.

42 Draft descriptors of the defining characteristics of learning, for each level of the framework, are set out in Annex 3.

### *Credit definitions*

43 Credit systems are used widely, but not universally, within higher education, as a measure of the amount of learning associated with elements of programmes, and of whole programmes. Credit definitions are included within the framework on the basis that they are a currency that is generally recognised, even by those institutions that choose not to calibrate their programmes in this way.

44 Many institutions have formalised structures of level and credit, particularly where options are offered within a modular scheme. In those circumstances, the structure should be designed to ensure there is coherence in programmes that are determined, in part, by student choice of modules.

45 Some institutions participate in consortia that adopt common schemes of credit accumulation and transfer, to facilitate movement of students between institutions, not least in the context of life-long learning. Such institutions are likely to adopt the common level descriptors of the credit consortium of which they are members. Similarly, shared approaches to the use of credit and level definitions are used to facilitate the continuation of professional learning, and to assist professional and statutory bodies to recognise this learning through the award of further professional qualifications.

46 The descriptors of the characteristics of learning at each level, proposed in this paper, should be broadly consistent with the level descriptors used by the main credit consortia. Indeed, the Agency has refrained from prescribing more detailed level descriptors of its own, as this is a matter that belongs more appropriately to institutions, individually or in voluntary consortia.

47 In Table 1 (see above), credit definitions have been included for typical qualifications at each of the levels. The credit definitions are in two parts, the total volume of credit required for the qualification, and the minimum volume of credit required at the level at which the qualification is awarded.

48 Whether or not credit gained elsewhere by a student is to be counted towards a particular qualification is a matter for decision by the institution offering that qualification. Recognition of prior learning, whether or not measured by credit, remains a matter of academic judgement of the extent to which such learning contributes to the intended outcomes of a programme.

### *Nomenclature issues*

49 One principle of the framework is that the nomenclature of qualifications should be consistent, and provide an accurate representation of their nature. For many stakeholders, the title used for a qualification will be the main source of information they use to understand the typical characteristics of that qualification. As the range of qualifications has expanded rapidly, so different practices in the use of qualification titles have emerged. For example, the Dearing Report identified five different types of qualification for which M is used frequently in the title.

50 The framework will require institutions to adopt a common approach to the titles they select for their qualifications. In particular, postgraduate titles should be restricted to qualifications for which there are sufficient assessed postgraduate level outcomes to meet the credit definitions for a postgraduate qualification. Programmes that are postgraduate in time, but not in level, should not make use of a postgraduate title. A detailed position on nomenclature is given in Annex 4.

### *Comments on the position adopted by the Agency*

51 The Agency would welcome comments on the position set out in this paper. Views would be particularly welcome on the following issues that have not been dealt with in earlier consultation exercises:

- the appropriateness and usefulness of the proposed qualification descriptors;
- the appropriateness and usefulness of the proposed descriptors of the defining characteristics of learning at each level;
- whether there should be a qualification title, additional to 'graduate certificate' and 'graduate diploma' for high volume conversion courses having a total credit requirement of 180 or more. If so, what title should be used?
- the detailed nomenclature issues addressed in Annex 4.

52 The Agency has arranged a series of meetings at which discussion on the position and the draft descriptors, in particular, will take place.

53 Written comments should be submitted by 30 September 2000 to Professor Nick Harris, Development Directorate, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB. Email [s.ibberson@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:s.ibberson@qaa.ac.uk)

### *Web site references*

The following documents may be found on the QAA web site at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk):

- report on survey of employer understanding of higher education qualification titles;
- second consultation paper on the Qualifications Frameworks;
- responses to second consultation paper.

The text of the Bologna Declaration may be found at [www.unige.ch/cre/](http://www.unige.ch/cre/)

### *Annexes*

- 1 Questions and answers.
- 2 Qualification descriptors.
- 3 Characteristics of learning at the levels of the framework.
- 4 Nomenclature of higher education qualifications.

## Annex 1

### *Questions and answers about the implementation and application of the framework*

Higher education institutions will wish to consider how the position set out in this paper will affect their own practices. A number of questions which it is anticipated might be raised are set out below, together with answers.

1 ***We have adopted across the institution the level descriptors of one of the credit consortia. Will we need to abandon this practice once the framework is introduced?*** Institutions operating within the framework will be able to make use of existing level descriptors to supplement the broad guidance offered by the Agency on qualification descriptors and descriptors of the characteristics of learning at each level. Institutions will wish to consider whether the level descriptors with which they have been working are in line with the general guidance - it is anticipated that in most cases they will be.

2 ***How does a four-level undergraduate structure match up to three-year degree programmes? Will our credit accumulation and transfer scheme have to have a fourth level inserted?*** Levels and years do not have to match, and you do not have to use all of the levels if you do not consider that appropriate. A three-year programme leading to an ordinary degree at level 3 might match levels and years. A three-year programme leading to an honours degree at level 4, with a high ability intake, might match levels and years by teaching little or no material at level 1. In many cases, programmes already mix years and levels - for example, a specialist option taught in alternate years to a mixed group of second and third year students. A further example might be an honours degree programme that attracted students with non-standard entry qualifications, and which mixed level 1 and 2 material in the first year, and level 2 and 3 in the second. Describing four levels that can be used for modules gives greater flexibility. There is no need to insert extra levels in established CAT schemes; the number of levels in those schemes can be set to suit their users.

3 ***What about the Foundation Degree?*** The principles underpinning the framework will apply equally to the proposed Foundation Degree as to any other new qualification that needs to be placed within the framework.

4 ***Will the Agency offer detailed guidance on the way in which the framework should be used?*** When the final position on the framework is published the Agency will publish further guidance to institutions on how they might work within the frameworks. In due course, the guidance might develop into a section of the Agency's *Code of practice*

5 ***We want to be responsive to student and employers demands and the expectations of widening participation and lifelong learning. How can we develop new types of qualifications when they don't have a place in the framework?*** The introduction of a qualifications framework does not mean that new or new types of qualifications can't be developed. The framework does, however, provide a means of identifying an appropriate title for the qualification and the principles to be applied when determining the level of the qualification in the framework.

6 ***What is the Bologna Declaration, and why does it matter?*** The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, to which the United Kingdom government is a signatory, urges European states to define higher education qualifications by reference to two cycles of study. The first cycle would lead, typically, to a Bachelors degree and the second, subsequent cycle to a Masters degree or Doctorate. In many European countries qualifications are defined primarily by the time taken to achieve them, and the sequence in which they are gained. In the United Kingdom the outcomes represented by the qualification are usually

of greater importance than the number of years spent in study, or the possession of a particular precursor qualification. This raises particular issues for the Masters title, not least when used for degrees such as MEng, which are gained as a result of extended undergraduate study. In such cases the validity of the award rests on the outcomes achieved, not on the time taken to achieve them or on progression from a first degree. It is important that the holders of such Masters degrees do not find themselves disadvantaged, in terms of progression to professional qualifications, in relation to holders of equivalent academic qualifications gained elsewhere in Europe. It is necessary to demonstrate that, in all circumstances, a Masters degree represents a minimum level of achievement that equates to the level associated with the second cycle qualifications envisaged in the Bologna Declaration. Use of the Masters title for lower level achievement runs the risk of devaluing the standing of the Masters degree generally; introduction of a 'Higher Masters' runs the risk that any Masters degree that was not placed in that higher category would be seen as representing undergraduate level achievement only.

**7 *Why don't we call all programmes undertaken by graduates 'postgraduate'?*** There is a distinction between programmes that are postgraduate in time, ie they are taken after acquisition of a first degree; and programmes that are also postgraduate in level. There are many graduate programmes with content that is at an undergraduate level, and which in some cases may be drawn from lower levels of undergraduate study. Such programmes are often regarded as conversion courses, which enable a student who graduated in one discipline to progress to a career in another, such as law, business or education. Other programmes in such fields, whether aimed at graduates of the same discipline or not, are designed to contain substantial elements of postgraduate level work. It is important that differences of level between programmes are reflected clearly in the award titles. For the lower level programmes, depending upon the volume of study, the terms 'graduate certificate' (lower volume/60 credits) or 'graduate diploma' (higher volume/120 credits) should be used.

**8 *Shouldn't all programmes at postgraduate level lead to at least a Masters degree?*** There are many short programmes that contain Masters level material, but an insufficient volume to warrant the award of a Masters degree. Such programmes may be taken as specialist, top-up programmes by graduates in their own discipline, or they may be offered as post experience programmes, for example within a scheme of continuous professional development (CPD). The titles 'postgraduate certificate' (lower volume/60 credits) and 'postgraduate diploma' (higher volume/120 credits) are available for awards in respect of such programmes, and the programmes may well carry credit towards a full Masters degree gained at a later stage. A Masters degree should not be awarded unless there is a volume of work broadly equivalent to one year's full time study (in credit terms, 180 units) of which at least five sixths is at Masters level. (The tolerance of one sixth recognises that some Masters programmes will commence with introductory material that may not itself be at Masters level.)

**9 *We currently offer extended or enhanced undergraduate programmes leading to an MEng qualification. Will we be able to continue to do so once the frameworks are introduced?*** Yes, but only if there is a sufficient number of credits for outcomes assessed at Masters level. A programme leading to a qualification with the Masters title would have a minimum of 150 credits at level 5 - the Masters level. An undergraduate programme requiring a minimum of 150 credits assessed at level 5 could make use of the M or masters title. Of course, you may continue to provide an extended programme - of say four years - which does not require assessment of outcomes at masters level. In such a case the title of the award would need to be changed so that the M title was not used. The title would need to make it clear that the outcomes were assessed at an undergraduate not a postgraduate level.

10 ***What will happen if we award a qualification for a programme that does not have sufficient outcomes assessed at the appropriate level for the award?*** It is likely that the Agency's reviewers would conclude that they could not have confidence that standards were being maintained, in respect of that programme. That judgement would appear in the published report on the institution's provision in the subject area concerned.

11 ***Does that mean that all Scottish MA courses are going to fail?*** No. It would be perverse for the Agency to categorise a significant proportion of Scottish undergraduate provision as failing to meet standards, simply because of the continuing use of a traditional award title. Subject to all other aspects of standards being satisfactory, reviewers could express confidence that standards were being maintained, notwithstanding the use of the Masters title for provision that was at honours degree level only. However, the report would contain a rider to the effect that the degree reflected Scottish custom and practice, and the positive judgement on standards should not be taken as implying that the outcomes of the programmes were at postgraduate level, or that the award was a 'second cycle' qualification within the meaning of the Bologna Declaration.

12 ***What about the Oxbridge MA?*** Many consider this to be a confusing anomaly. It is not an academic qualification, as it is not awarded as a result of any programme of study or research. There is thus no programme that could be reviewed by the Agency to determine whether the outcomes matched the level of an associated award. The Agency will nevertheless promote understanding of the meaning of all higher education qualifications, to both domestic and international audiences.

14 ***Why all the fuss about standardising titles? Surely everyone knows what all the different Masters degrees stand for?*** No they don't. Independent research carried out for the Agency showed that three-quarters of employers find the titles of higher education awards confusing.

15 ***So must we all use the same titles for our awards?*** Not necessarily. What you must not do is to mislead - for example by using a title that implies a higher level of achievement than was actually demonstrated by the student. Awarding a Masters degree for a programme that contained only or predominantly undergraduate level material and assessments would be misleading. However, awarding a BPhil for a Masters level programme might confuse, but it does not mislead. Ideally, one should neither mislead nor confuse.

16 ***How long have we got to sort it out?*** Many changes cannot be made overnight. In particular the qualification for successful completion of a programme cannot be reduced for students already accepted to study on that programme. Any changes that are needed should be introduced progressively over the period from 2000-06. For one- or two-year programmes, that allows a considerable period of time in which changes can be considered, and so it should be possible for changes to be made well before the end of that period. For four-year enhanced undergraduate programmes leading to qualifications with Masters titles, the timetable is rather tighter. If content needs to be enhanced, there is a reasonable time available in which to consider and introduce changes, as most of the Masters level work is to be found in the last two years of the programme. However, if such programmes contain insufficient Masters level work to warrant the award of a Masters degree, and it is not intended to alter the content, then early decisions will need to be taken about the way in which such programmes will be described to students who are due to graduate after 2006.

## Annex 2

### Qualification descriptors

#### Qualifications at level HE1

**Typical current qualifications:** Certificate of Higher Education, often abbreviated to CertHE

Qualifications at level HE1 are awarded to students who have shown:

- i a sound 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 as appropriate to the subject area(s), an ability to present, evaluate and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, and identify relationships within the data using defined techniques and/or with guidance;
- iii an ability to make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.

Typically holders of a qualification at HE1 should 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 in situations requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility, but where the criteria for decision making are largely set by superiors.

#### Qualifications at level HE2

**Typical current qualifications:** Diploma of Higher Education, often abbreviated to DipHE; HND

Qualifications at level HE2 are awarded to students who have shown:

- i the necessary knowledge for a secure understanding of concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these in accordance with the analytical conventions of the area(s) studied;
- ii as appropriate to the subject area(s), an ability to present, evaluate, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, to develop lines of argument and make critical judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study, and to consider the wider implications of such judgements.

Typically holders of a qualification at HE2 should be able to:

- a evaluate and demonstrate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work;
- b communicate, in a variety of forms and with structured and coherent arguments, the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and identify the broader principles, issues and impacts;

- 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 in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and in contexts where they are contributing to (the development of) decision-making processes.

### *Qualifications at level HE3*

**Typical current qualifications:** Bachelors Degree without Honours, eg an Ordinary Degree or often abbreviated to BA, BSc

Qualifications at level HE3 are awarded to students who have shown:

- i a good knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, including an understanding of some advanced aspect(s) of their area(s) of study;
- ii an understanding of the limits of that knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

Typically holders of qualifications at HE3 should be able to:

- a use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information that may be incomplete or include abstract concepts. Where problems arise from that analysis, their understanding will also enable them to suggest and carry out approaches for the solution of such problems;
- 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 with confidence;
- c respond positively to (further) professional training, developing existing skills, and acquiring new competencies that enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations;

and will have:

- d qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision making in complex contexts.

### *Qualifications at level HE4*

Typical current qualifications: Bachelors degrees with honours, often referred to as 'honours degrees' and abbreviated to eg BA Hons, BSc Hons

Qualifications at level HE4 are awarded to students who have shown:

- i a systematic understanding of key aspects of their area(s) of study, including a coherent and detailed knowledge of some specialised aspects of their subject(s);
- ii an ability to deploy established analytical techniques within their discipline accurately;
- iii an ability to devise and sustain arguments and/or to solve problems using ideas or techniques some of which will be at the forefront of their subject(s);
- iv an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and the ability critically to evaluate evidence, concepts, arguments, and assumptions, drawn from a wide range of sources, and to reach judgements on the basis of their own evaluation of data, evidence and ideas.



Typically holders of qualifications at HE4 should be able to:

- a apply the methods, techniques and (where applicable) modes of practice that they have learned and review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding;
- b consider abstract data, concepts and/or raw materials and frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem;
- c communicate information, ideas, problems, and solutions, in a variety of formats appropriate to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- d initiate, research, and sustain a project, based on individual initiative and/or research, and to present findings in a variety of media;
- e undertake additional training of a rigorous and professional nature, enabling them to take initiatives and accept significant responsibility within organisations;

and will have:

- f qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, including the potential for decision making in complex and unpredictable contexts of a professional or equivalent nature.

#### *Qualifications at level HE5 (postgraduate level 1)*

**Typical current qualifications:** Masters degrees, eg MA, MSc, MPhil

Qualifications at level HE5 are awarded to students who have shown:

- i a systematic understanding of knowledge and a critical awareness of associated issues some of which, either separately or in combination, are at the forefront of their academic discipline or area of professional/vocational study or practice;
- ii a comprehensive understanding of relevant techniques applicable to their research or equivalent advanced scholarship;
- iii an ability to apply such techniques, and an understanding of how their results may be used to inform judgements and develop and advance ideas and/or practice. Evidence of originality in the application of knowledge and critical awareness should be expected.

Typically holders of qualifications at HE5 should be able to:

- a deal with complex issues, make informed judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate these clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- b act autonomously in planning, implementing and analysing work regarded as being of a professional or equivalent level;
- c demonstrate self direction in tackling and solving problems;
- d with further professional training, to remain at the forefront of their subject area(s) or be able to develop new skills to a high level;

and they will have:

- e the knowledge and technical capacity and qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable contexts of a professional or equivalent context.

*Qualifications at level HE6 (postgraduate level 2)*

**Typical current qualifications:** Doctoral degrees, eg PhD/DPhil, DMus

Qualifications at level HE6 are awarded to students who have provided evidence of:

- i a systematic acquisition of knowledge and a critical awareness of issues most of which, either separately or in combination, are at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional/vocational study or practice;
- ii the ability to design a project of advanced research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, and adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems and/or in the area of the project;
- iii a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and/or advanced enquiry, and their contribution to the planning and adjustment of their programme of work;
- iv successful application of such techniques, and use of their results, to inform judgements and develop ideas that make original or innovative advances in the area of study and/or professional practice;
- v the generation of new knowledge or material that would be of such quality (and quantity) to pass peer review, extend the forefront of knowledge and/or understanding of the area of study, and merit public presentation in academic and/or professional contexts.

Typically holders of HE6 qualifications should be able to:

- a deal with complex issues, usually considered to be of a professional nature, often make informed judgements in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- b act autonomously in planning, implementing and analysing work regarded as being of a professional or equivalent level;
- c take a leadership role and demonstrate innovative approaches to tackling and solving problems;
- d where appropriate, continue to undertake pure and/or applied research at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches;

and will have:

- e the knowledge and technical capacity and qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable contexts of a professional or equivalent nature.

## **Annex 3**

### ***Characteristics of learning at the levels of the framework***

The notion of 'level' of study or achievement is one that may be used to calibrate progression through a programme of study, or to differentiate one qualification from another. Within a programme, academic and intellectual progression is secured by imposing increasing demands on the learner, over time, in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the capacity for conceptualisation, and increasing autonomy in learning. Put simply, as students progress within a programme, and as they move to programmes at higher levels, they will tackle work of increasing difficulty, and will do so with greater reliance on their own learning abilities.

Higher education is about the creation, application and transmission of knowledge. The frontiers at which new knowledge is created, and fresh insights gained, are moving forward all the time. In terms of knowledge, and the understanding necessary to master it, an academic level cannot be static. It must develop to maintain its relationship with the changing frontiers of knowledge and understanding. Any description of the characteristics of learning must reflect the dynamic nature of knowledge.

To ensure that progression occurs, it is necessary to have an understanding of the main variables that develop between levels. These are:

#### ***Skills and know-how***

Specific study skills, research skills, and the general ability to manage one's own learning should develop progressively at each level of the framework. There will be some variation in the rate at which particular skills are developed, depending on the nature of the subject or subjects studied.

Skills and techniques specific to individual subjects should develop progressively, at a rate and to an extent governed by the nature of the discipline.

#### ***Learner autonomy***

All learning will be directed or guided to some extent by academic staff. As a student progresses through the levels of the framework, the balance will shift from significant staff direction to substantial learner autonomy.

At the point of first entry to higher education, learning will take place in a framework determined largely by academic staff. By level 4 (the honours degree) learning should be substantially self-managed. By the end of doctoral studies (level 6), the student should be capable of proposing research strategies through which learning and the creation of new knowledge will occur.

#### ***Sources of information***

As a student progresses through the levels of the framework, the balance of sources of information that they use will alter, with an increasing reliance upon primary, rather than secondary sources.

At the point of first entry to higher education, the main sources of information will be standard text books. Depending on the nature of the discipline and its literature, there should be progression through use also of summary articles, to use of primary sources, such as refereed research articles, law reports, or contemporary historical texts. Level 4 should involve study that makes extensive use of such primary sources, together with study of learned critiques of current research.

*Knowledge and understanding: the defining characteristics*

All of the variables mentioned above relate to the corpus of knowledge of the subject or subjects studied. It is knowledge itself, and the understanding needed to master and interpret it, that is the defining characteristic of a level of study. The point of reference is that of the forefront of current knowledge, as represented by current research or equivalent advanced scholarship. Descriptors of level refer to how closely study approaches the frontiers of current knowledge, and across what range of such knowledge.

*Level 1*

Knowledge

***Acquisition of knowledge involves a broadening and deepening of the knowledge base required for admission to the programme; and/or involves introduction to new fields of knowledge.***

Understanding

***Ability to comprehend the analytical frameworks and hypotheses that order and explain the basic subject matter in the field(s) of study.***

*Level 2*

Knowledge

***Acquisition of knowledge that illustrates and exemplifies the underlying concepts and principles of the subjects studied. Knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in those subject(s).***

Understanding

***Ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied. Ability to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study. Appreciation of the boundaries of the subject(s) studied, and of inter-relationships with other subjects.***

*Level 3*

Knowledge

***Acquisition of knowledge, some of which is towards the forefront of the subject(s) studied. Secure knowledge of the way in which well established principles within the subject(s) have developed.***

Understanding

***Ability to use established techniques to analyse critically abstract concepts, and data that may be incomplete. Ability to formulate problem-solving strategies from such analyses.***

*Level 4*

## Knowledge

***Acquisition of knowledge that is at the forefront of at least some aspects of the subject, and which is informed substantially by current research or other advanced scholarship.***

## Understanding

***Conceptual understanding that enables the student to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the subject. Appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge.***

*Level 5*

## Knowledge

***Acquisition of knowledge, most of which is at the forefront of the relevant aspects of the subject, and is derived from current research or other advanced scholarship. Some creation or development of new knowledge.***

## Understanding

***Conceptual understanding that enables the student to evaluate critically current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the subject. Ability to evaluate hypotheses, and to propose alternatives to them. Ability to advance knowledge and understanding in the discipline through the use of established techniques of research and enquiry.***

*Level 6*

## Knowledge

***Creation and interpretation of new knowledge through original research, or other advanced scholarship. Original insight into knowledge.***

## Understanding

***Ability to conceptualise, design and implement a strategy for the generation of significant new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the subject.***

## Annex 4

### *Nomenclature of higher education qualifications*

Accuracy and consistency of nomenclature are essential to ensure public understanding of higher education qualifications.

Several of the principles on which the National Qualifications Framework is based are concerned with nomenclature:

- the framework is based on defined levels, generic qualification descriptors and **consistency of nomenclature** and credit at those levels;
- differentiation between levels (**and hence titles**) is not based on the nature of the learning or scholarship involved, eg whether a programme is taught- or research-based;
- the **nomenclature of qualifications should** provide an accurate representation of their nature.

The following recommendations seek to implement these principles.

Recommendations for the use of specific nomenclatures for qualifications

Universities, and others who award higher education qualifications, should describe their qualifications with clarity and consistency.

- *at level 6*
  - use of PhD and DPhil should be restricted to qualifications where assessment is solely by a final thesis; or published work, artefact or performance that is accompanied by a written commentary placing it within its academic context;
  - titles used for other doctoral qualifications should provide an accurate representation of the field(s) of study.
- *at level 5*
  - use of a title including the 'Masters' (M) stem, or the word 'Postgraduate', should be restricted to qualifications with the specified minimum credit at masters level;
  - MPhil should be reserved for qualifications made in respect of higher volume masters programmes (typically equivalent to more than one year's full time study) that involve a substantial element of research or equivalent work;
  - the Masters title may be used for extended and enhanced undergraduate programmes where the minimum credit requirement for a Masters degree is met. Titles such as MEng, MChem are commonly used for such undergraduate masters qualifications.
- *at level 4*
  - programmes of study that typically require graduate (or equivalent) entry but do not meet the level requirements of postgraduate programmes, but do reflect outcomes predominantly at levels 3 and/or 4, should use a nomenclature based on the terms Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma.
  - there should be a greater clarity and consistency in the way in which the subject focus of degrees is represented. Where a degree title goes beyond the conventional generic titles of Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science and indicates the subject(s) studied, the following convention is proposed:

- |                                 |                |   |
|---------------------------------|----------------|---|
| • single subject programme      | A              | eg BA Hons in French; BA Hons (French)                          |
| • joint subjects programme      | B and C        | eg BA Hons (Geography and Geology)                              |
| • single subject with a minor   | D with E       | eg BSc Hons in Biology with Chemistry                           |
| • single subject with 2 minors  | A with E and F | eg BEcon Hons (Economics with Sociology and Anthropology)       |
| • joint subject with a minor    | B and C with E | eg BSc Hons Sports Science and Physiology with Business Studies |
| • combined studies              | A              | eg BA Hons (Combined Studies)                                   |
| • combined studies with a minor | A with E       | eg BA Hons (Combined Studies with History)                      |

Where, typically, A represents a minimum of 80%, B and C each represent a minimum of 40%, D a minimum of 75%, and E and F a minimum of 10% of the total summatively assessed work.

Normally, a maximum of three fields of study may be identified.

- *at level 3:*
  - Bachelors Degrees (without honours) including Ordinary Degrees should be placed at this level.
- *at level 2:*
  - Diplomas of Higher Education should be placed at this level.
- *at level 1:*
  - Certificates of Higher Education should be placed at this level.

### *PGCE*

The Postgraduate Certificate of Education, usually abbreviated to PGCE, is an internationally recognised UK qualification. The intended level of study in some PGCE programmes may mean that a 'postgraduate' nomenclature is no longer appropriate. It has been suggested that the abbreviated form PGCE should be retained, perhaps from Professional Graduate Certificate in Education.

### *Honorary degrees*

Responses to the consultations on the National Qualifications Framework indicated considerable support for clarification and consistency in the nomenclature of honorary degrees. Many responses proposed general adoption of the titles M University and D University for honorary degrees at these levels.

### *Specific issues for consultation*

The Agency would particularly welcome views on:

- the proposed convention on honours degree titles that name the subject(s) studied;
- the proposed full title for the PGCE.