

## **Master's degree characteristics**

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## Preface

This new reference point, *Master's degree characteristics*, is presented for those with an interest in, or responsibility for, master's degrees in the UK. The document has been developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in response to a number of requests from practitioners in higher education. In developing it we have worked closely with an external advisory group and taken account of discussions held at two sector-wide events and comments received as part of a formal consultation. The reference point is intended to **offer advice and guidance**; it does **not** form part of the Academic Infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

The landscape for master's degrees in the UK is flexible and diverse. This reference point seeks to reflect and accommodate the range of programme types, including aims, mode of delivery, methods of teaching, learning and assessment, and intended outcomes, rather than to prescribe any particular model. Higher education institutions are encouraged, however, to be as clear as possible in describing their programmes and locating them amidst the diversity that currently exists, drawing upon the characteristics identified in this document as appropriate.

The *Master's degree characteristics* document is intended to be of practical help to providers and other interested parties, including those wishing to understand more about the nature of UK master's degrees more generally, which may include students, employers and overseas audiences. Institutions are encouraged to consult the guidance contained in the document when designing, delivering and reviewing new and existing programmes, and when describing programmes in information intended for prospective students and others.

The new reference point offers guidance on the nature of different types of master's degree, all of which are expected to meet the outcomes identified in the qualification descriptor of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), 2008 or *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*, 2001. The characteristics described here relate to the different ways in which a master's degree may be provided in delivering the outcomes identified in the national qualification descriptor. In some instances, there may be additional points of reference that providers may wish to draw upon, including a small number of subject benchmark statements for master's degrees in particular subjects<sup>2</sup> and the guidance or requirements of relevant professional, statutory or regulatory bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> The Academic Infrastructure is composed of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), 2008 and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*, 2001; programme specifications; subject benchmark statements; and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*). The various parts of the Academic Infrastructure are available at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk).

<sup>2</sup> QAA currently publishes master's degree subject benchmark statements for *Business and Management*; *Chemistry*; *Engineering* (MEng); *Mathematics, statistics and operational research* (MMath); *Pharmacy* (MPharm); and *Physics, astronomy and astrophysics* (MPhys/MSci).

# 1 Defining characteristics of master's degrees

## 1.1 Introduction

Various types of master's degrees exist in UK higher education. There are no nationally-agreed definitions of types, and awards with similar titles can vary in nature both between institutions and across disciplines.<sup>3</sup> This situation reflects the independent and autonomous nature of UK higher education institutions and the diversity of traditions that exists within different disciplines.

All master's degrees are expected to meet the generic statement of outcomes set out in the qualification descriptor within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), 2008 or *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*, 2001. The qualification descriptor sets out broad expected outcomes for a master's degree in terms of what graduates should be able to demonstrate and the wider abilities that they would be expected to have developed.

Master's degrees in the UK are often described as either 'taught' or 'research' depending on the relative proportion of structured learning and independent study making up the award. In a third broad 'professional' or 'practice' category, the predominant mode of delivery is through work-based or practice-related learning.<sup>4</sup>

While the above classifications may provide a convenient shorthand, they are not definitive. Most 'taught' master's will include a degree of independent study or research and many 'research' master's will include some learning undertaken in a structured environment. Master's considered to be of the 'professional/practice' type often combine structured and independent learning methods alongside time spent in practice. Furthermore, there may be characteristics other than the mode of delivery that a higher education provider feels are important in defining the award, for example, the intention of the award or its relationship to further study or employment.

This document does not attempt to categorise master's degrees based on any particular characteristic. Instead, a set of key characteristics are described which together make up the profile of a master's degree. Key characteristics are described in terms of purpose, content, structure and delivery, teaching, learning and assessment methods, and relationship to further study or employment. Higher education providers may describe their master's awards in terms of these characteristics as appropriate. This approach does not, therefore, seek to straightjacket current provision, but rather to reflect it.

For those seeking further guidance, Appendix 1 provides a description of three broad types of master's awards: 'research', 'specialised/advanced study' and 'professional/practice'. These descriptions are **indicative only** and are not intended to be definitive or exhaustive given the diversity in current provision outlined above.

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<sup>3</sup> There may be exceptions where the title of an award is protected by a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB).

<sup>4</sup> The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge is not an academic qualification (FHEQ, 2008, note, p 23). The Master of Arts with Honours (MA (Hons)) is used in some faculties in a small number of universities in Scotland for the Scottish Bachelors Degree with Honours (SCQF Handbook: User Guide, 2009, p 135). Some higher education institutions grant honorary master's degrees. None of these fall within the scope of the present document.

## 1.2 Purpose

Master's degrees may be designed to fulfil a range of purposes. The purpose for which the degree is intended will reflect both the desires and ambitions of students and the traditions and needs of particular disciplines and professions. That master's degrees may be designed with more than one purpose in mind will be reflected in the destinations of graduates.

As articulated in the national qualification descriptor, graduates of all master's degrees should be capable of demonstrating a systematic understanding of knowledge, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of the discipline, field of study or area of professional practice. They should be capable of demonstrating originality in their application of that knowledge and in addressing problems. They will have demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship. In relation to future employment, master's graduates will be expected to possess the skills needed to exercise independent learning and to develop new skills to a high level. The full qualification descriptor is provided in Appendix 2a (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and 2b (Scotland).

Higher education providers may offer a master's degree with the specific intention of:

- enabling students to focus on a particular aspect of a broader subject area in which they have prior knowledge or experience through previous study or employment (see 'specialised/advanced study' master's in Appendix 1); and/or
- enabling students to focus on a particular subject area or field of study in greater depth than they encountered during the course of previous study or experience. This may include enabling students to develop knowledge of a new discipline or field of study in combination with a relevant subject area in which they have prior knowledge or experience (see 'specialised/advanced study' master's in Appendix 1); and/or
- enabling students to learn how to conduct research, often linked to a particular discipline or field of study. Programmes will often include a greater emphasis on the delivery of structured learning as opposed to independent study than those which are dedicated to the actual undertaking of research (see 'specialised/advanced study' master's in Appendix 1); and/or
- enabling students to undertake a research project on a topic within the area of interest that makes up the majority of the overall assessment (see 'research' master's in Appendix 1); and/or
- enabling students to specialise or to become more highly specialised in an area of employment or practice related to a particular profession (see 'professional/practice' master's in Appendix 1).

## 1.3 Content

The content of a master's degree in terms of the areas of knowledge and understanding, expertise and skills that the student will acquire will be defined as appropriate by the provider. Often master's degrees do not fall within traditional discipline boundaries that are recognisable at previous academic levels of study; they may also be highly specialised and near the boundaries of current knowledge.

Hence this document does not attempt to set out a framework for degree content. Some subject communities have developed subject benchmark statements for master's awards in particular areas which may offer guidance around programme content (for a list of available statements, see footnote 2 in the Preface).

The content of a programme will be appropriate to the intended purpose of the award, reflecting the traditions and needs of the discipline or field of study, or the profession, or both. In some cases, the content of the degree will be agreed with an employer, either in part or in full. Other programmes, which are externally recognised, validated or accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB) will be designed in accordance with the requirements of the body that recognises or accredits the award. These bodies tend to be active in subject areas linked to particular professions or areas of professional practice, for example accountancy and finance, law, health and social care, science, engineering and construction (see also section 1.7).

#### **1.4 Structure and delivery**

Master's degrees may be delivered via a full or part-time mode of study. They may include greater or lesser amounts of distance learning or may combine methods. In terms of duration, many are offered on the basis of one year of full-time study or the equivalent for part-time. However, programmes may be shorter or longer, with the MPhil usually taking up to two years full-time.

Master's degrees may be modular, and may incorporate progression through postgraduate certificate and diploma. In such cases providers will wish to ensure that integration and synthesis across the programme lead to intended learning outcomes beyond those of its constituent parts. Some may also be delivered partly, and sometimes fully, through an employment setting. The mode of delivery will, in all cases, be clear for applicants and agreed by providers. It will be offered in the context of an integrated strategy of teaching, learning and assessment that enables the student to demonstrate the intended learning outcomes appropriate to the programme's overall aims.

Integrated master's awards - which are common in science, mathematics and engineering - are delivered through a programme that combines study at the level of a bachelor's degree with honours with study at master's level. As such, a student graduates with a master's degree after a single four-year, or five-year in Scotland, programme of study. If a work placement is included, the time taken to complete the programme may be extended.

There are also examples of master's degrees that are delivered through an integrated programme of study that includes a three-year doctoral degree. In such cases, a student graduates with a doctoral degree such as a PhD or DPhil after a single, four-year (minimum) programme of study.

#### **1.5 Volume of learning and credit**

This document is concerned with the defining characteristics of master's degrees. While the nature of a master's degree is not determined by the volume of credit associated with it, the allocation of credit provides information about the amount of learning and the academic demands of that learning. As such it may assist in decisions about academic progression between programmes or from one academic level to another.

In 2008, QAA published a credit framework for England, the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*, which identifies typical minimum credit allocations associated with different types of academic qualifications. The guidance states that a master's degree will have a typical minimum of 180 credits, of which at least 150 will be at master's level. For an integrated master's, a credit allocation of 480 with at least 120 at master's level is identified. No credit values are given for master's conducted primarily via research, but taught components of research master's degrees may attract credit. An MPhil delivered primarily via structured learning ('taught') will have a typical minimum credit value of 360, of which 240 will be at master's level.

In Wales, the minimum volume of credit for a master's award is, similarly, 180 with at least 150 at the level of a master's degree. For the integrated master's degree, a minimum of 480 credits with 120 at level of a master's degree is again identified (*Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales*, 2004).

In Scotland, *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*, 2001 also identifies a minimum of 180 credits for a master's, of which at least 150 should be at master's level. The integrated master's has a higher overall volume of credit than do similar awards in the rest of the UK, which reflects the longer, four-year bachelor's with honours degree in Scotland. In Scotland, the integrated master's typically attracts 600 credits, of which at least 120 should be at master's level.

Readers should refer to the credit frameworks for the different parts of the UK referenced in the text for further details about the role of credit and its use in recording student achievement.

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), developed by the European Commission, is a system for the use of academic credit aimed at facilitating student mobility in Europe (see also section 3 on the Bologna Process). Many UK institutions make use of ECTS for this purpose.

The *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)*<sup>5</sup> identifies typical ECTS credit values associated with qualifications at three cycles, which are identified by the end-of-cycle qualification: bachelors (first cycle), master's (second cycle) and doctorate (third cycle). Master's degrees typically have 90-120 ECTS credits (180-240 UK credits<sup>6</sup>), with a minimum of 60 credits (120 UK credits) at the level of the second cycle. For the award of ECTS credits, the learning outcomes of a qualification must be consistent with the relevant outcomes identified in the qualification descriptor for the end-of-cycle award (the 'Dublin Descriptors') set out in the FQ-EHEA. For those seeking further information, a revised users' guide to ECTS was published in 2009<sup>7</sup> and, in addition, the UK HE Europe Unit has published guidance on the relationship between UK arrangements for academic credit and ECTS.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: [www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/050218\\_QF\\_EHEA.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> In everyday practice, as identified in the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*, 2008, two UK credits are equivalent to one ECTS credit. See [www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/credit](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/credit).

<sup>7</sup> ECTS Users' Guide (revised 2009) is available from: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> UK HE Europe Unit guidance on the relationship between UK arrangements for academic credit and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is available at: [www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe\\_unit2/resources/E-09-06\\_ECTS\\_Users'Guide.pdf](http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/resources/E-09-06_ECTS_Users'Guide.pdf).

## 1.6 Teaching, learning and assessment

### Teaching and learning

Master's degrees may be delivered through a variety of methods of learning and most will combine different methods. Traditionally, providers have distinguished between master's degrees that are awarded on the basis of an independent, though supervised, research project undertaken by the student and those for which structured learning contributes the majority of the material to be assessed. However, any master's degree may draw upon a combination of methods of delivery as appropriate to the programme's overall aims.

There are also master's degrees aimed at initial or continuing professional development, which will involve a majority of learning that takes place in a professional or practice environment. Some such programmes may be designed and delivered through a partnership arrangement between a higher education provider and an employer. Authoritative and established guidance on the principles of good practice in this area is provided in sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*) on collaborative provision and work-based learning (*Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, 2004 and *Section 9: Work-based and placement-learning*, 2007).<sup>9</sup>

All master's programmes will normally be supported by an integrated teaching, learning and assessment strategy that demonstrates the appropriateness of the learning, teaching and assessment methods used in relation to the intended learning outcomes being developed.

The particular teaching and learning methods to be used will be identified in individual programme documentation, such as a programme specification (see footnote 1 in the Preface). The most appropriate method or combination of methods will be a matter for individual providers to decide. Methods might include all or any of the following, selected as appropriate to the discipline or field of study and the programme's aims, mode of delivery and typical entrants:

- lectures
- tutorials
- seminars
- practical work, for example in a laboratory, in the field, workshop or studio
- the use of textbooks, journal papers, electronic databases and other self-study and e-learning materials
- project work
- practice sessions and learning through case studies
- work-based learning.

Further guidance on methods of teaching and learning may be found in subject benchmark statements (see footnote 1 of the Preface). Although most are aimed at bachelor's degrees with honours, the guidance on teaching and learning may also be helpful to those dealing with master's degrees, although master's degree programmes

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<sup>9</sup> The *Code of practice* is available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice).

will typically feature a greater emphasis on methods involving independent study towards a dissertation or other project-based work.

### **Assessment**

Appropriate and effective assessment will enable students to demonstrate the outcomes of learning intended for the programme. Assessment methods may be based on any or all of the following:

- essay assignments
- practical reports or portfolios
- a dissertation or other output from research/project work, which may include artefacts, performances or compositions
- written examinations
- oral examinations
- problem-solving exercises
- oral presentations
- posters
- placement reports.

Programmes may assess not only academic skills but also other skills and competencies including, where relevant, the requirements of any body that recognises or accredits the award.

Particularly for a modular master's programme that uses credit accumulation, providers will wish to ensure that suitable methods are used to assess the intended learning outcomes not only of the constituent parts but also of their integration and synthesis across the programme.

The *Code of practice* includes a section dedicated to student assessment that includes guidance on established practice (*Section 6: Assessment of students, 2006*).

### **1.7 Relationship to further study or employment**

As outlined in section 1.2, master's degrees vary in their purpose or intention, which will include their intended relationship to further study and/or employment.

Some master's degrees are explicitly linked to further study through entry to a doctoral qualification. Upon achieving the master's degree, a student progresses automatically into a doctorate.

In other cases, the degree will equip successful graduates with the potential to be able to enrol for doctoral study, but entry will not be guaranteed. Progression to doctoral study in such cases will depend on formal entry requirements and the judgement of relevant institutional staff.

Other types of master's degrees aim to prepare students for entry to a particular field

of employment, practice or profession, or for progression or transfer within it. In these cases a PSRB external to the institution may accredit the programme (see also section 1.3). Graduates of such programmes may be eligible for a particular professional status or may be permitted to enter a further period of practice, study or examination leading to the profession.

Although many programmes will be designed for a specific purpose, such as those linked to a doctorate or those that are related to a particular profession, in many cases graduates will be equipped to function in a variety of contexts, both work and study-related. The general capabilities and transferable skills expected of a master's graduate are identified in the qualification descriptor (Appendix 2a and 2b).

A more detailed specification of the knowledge, understanding, expertise and skills expected to be developed through the programme of study will be identified in individual programme documentation. Many of these skills will be generic, while others will be specific to the subject or profession or area of practice.

## **2 Naming of awards**

The description of broad types of master's degrees given in Appendix 1 includes an indication of degree titles (for example MSc, MA, MPhil). However, in the absence of nationally agreed definitions of types, the title of an award may not define its characteristics. Guidance for institutions on the naming of awards may be found in the FHEQ, 2008 and in *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland, 2001*.

## **3 The impact of the Bologna Process**

The UK is part of the intergovernmental initiative, commonly referred to as the Bologna Process, which aimed, at its inception in 1999, to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The overarching objectives of the Bologna process are to promote student and staff mobility across Europe and to enhance the attractiveness of European higher education worldwide.

One aim of the Bologna process is to make Europe's higher education systems more transparent and to facilitate the transfer of students between countries. The *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)* provides a mechanism for relating the qualifications frameworks of different countries to each other. The *Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland, 2001*, and the FHEQ, 2008, have each been verified as compatible with the FQ-EHEA, in 2006 and 2008 respectively, so meeting the requirement set for participating countries by the 2003 Bergen ministerial Communiqué.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Verification of compatibility of the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland with the framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area - Report of the Scottish working group* is available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF).

*Verification of the compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) with The framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (FQ-EHEA), 2008* is available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ).

## **4 Code of practice: Postgraduate research programmes**

For master's degrees that fulfil the definition of a postgraduate research qualification given in the *Code of practice (Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes, 2004)*, there are expectations relating to established practice of the management of such programmes. The *Code of practice* defines a research qualification as:

...the PhD (including the New Route PhD and PhDs awarded on the basis of published work), all forms of taught or professional doctorate, and research master's degrees where the research component (including a requirement to produce original work), is larger than the taught component when measured by student effort.

Given that this definition includes such a broad range of qualifications, not all parts of this section of the *Code of practice* will apply equally to all types of research programme. However, the section was developed to give institutions clear guidance on the expectations of the funding councils, research councils and QAA in respect of the management of all research programmes, and so should be consulted by providers of relevant master's programmes.

## **5 Other qualifications at master's level: postgraduate certificates and diplomas**

This document refers specifically to master's degrees. Postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas are located at the same academic level as master's degrees in national qualification frameworks (FHEQ, 2008, and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland, 2001*). While having some outcomes that correspond to those of the qualification descriptor for a master's degree, postgraduate certificates and diplomas may not meet the full range of outcomes for a master's degree on account of a lower overall volume of learning (and credit) associated with the award. These types of qualification are often used in the context of initial and continuing professional development. Although postgraduate certificates and diplomas are not the specific focus of this document, those responsible for, or interested in, them may find some of the information and guidance presented here of use. Further information on the nature of these qualifications, and their relationship to master's degrees, may be found in the FHEQ, 2008, and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland, 2001*.

## **Appendix 1: General description of the characteristics of master's degrees considered to fall into one of three categories: I research, II specialised/advanced study, or III professional/practice**

The descriptions that follow are intended to be indicative rather than definitive. It is recognised that master's degrees may combine characteristics from different categories and that degrees bearing similar titles (for example MSc, MA) may be considered to fall within more than one category (see section 2 on Naming of awards)

### **I Research master's**

Examples: the MPhil.

#### **Programme characteristics**

Programmes in this category often have the following characteristics:

- the student normally conducts a research project through independent study
- they may include a smaller 'taught' element, for example, research methods modules, which may or may not be credit-bearing
- they are typically of 12 to 24 months' duration, with 24 months being most common, based on a full-time mode of study
- they normally fulfil the definition of research degrees given in Section 1 of the *Code of practice* on postgraduate research programmes, that is, 'research master's degrees where the research component (including a requirement to produce original work) is larger than the taught component when measured by student effort'
- assessment in these programmes is often specific to the individual and is likely to be via oral examination that involves discussion/defence of a thesis, dissertation or other output such as an artefact, performance or musical composition. Where credit-bearing 'taught' modules are part of a research master's degree, the assessment of those components is usually separate from the overall assessment.

#### **Programme purposes**

Programmes in this category may have the following aims:

- to prepare students for the next stage in their careers, whether pursuing further research or entering employment of different kinds
- to enable those undertaking the programme to contribute towards research in the discipline.

#### **Intended entrants**

Requirements for entry to a research master's programme (including the circumstances in which accreditation of prior knowledge, understanding and skills may be used) will be defined by the institution. However, programmes in this category often attract:

- entrants with a bachelor's degree with honours in a cognate or closely related subject
- entrants who have acquired experience through work or other means that enables staff responsible for admissions to be confident of the candidate's ability to succeed in the programme.

### **Relationship to further study or employment**

- graduates of research master's programmes will normally be prepared to enter a variety of types of employment or to continue academic study, for example, for a PhD or DPhil.

### **Characteristics of graduates**

Graduates of research master's degrees typically have:

- i) subject-specific attributes
  - an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the discipline informed by current scholarship and research, including a critical awareness of current issues and developments in the subject
  - the ability to study independently in the subject
  - the ability to use a range of techniques and research methods applicable to advanced scholarship in the subject.
- ii) generic attributes (including skills relevant to an employment-setting)

A range of generic abilities and skills that include the ability to:

- use initiative and take responsibility
- solve problems in creative and innovative ways
- make decisions in challenging situations
- continue to learn independently and to develop professionally, including the ability to pursue further research where appropriate
- communicate effectively, with colleagues and a wider audience, in a variety of media.

## **II Specialised/advanced study master's**

**Examples:** MSc, MA, MRes and some integrated master's.

### **Programme characteristics**

Programmes in this category often have the following characteristics:

- they are predominantly composed of structured learning opportunities (are 'taught') although frequently at least a third of the programme is devoted to a research project, leading to a dissertation or the production of other output such as an artefact, performance or musical composition
- they range from nine to 24 months' duration, with 12 months being most common, based on a full-time mode of study

- in the case of integrated master's degrees that fall within this type, master's level study is integrated with study at the level of a bachelor's with honours degree within a single programme. The first two characteristics above apply to the master's level part of the overall award
- this category of master's degrees also includes the MRes, where the student develops the ability to conduct research through a programme of structured learning
- other awards, such as Postgraduate certificate and Postgraduate diploma, will often be offered alongside specialised/advanced master's programmes to facilitate continuing professional development at different stages of a professional career.

### **Programme purposes**

Programmes in this category may have the following aims:

- to prepare students for the next stage in their careers, whether that is further academic or professional study, or entering employment of different kinds.

### **Intended entrants**

Requirements for entry to a specialised/advanced study programme (including the circumstances in which accreditation of prior knowledge, understanding and skills may be used) will be defined by the institution. However, programmes in this category often attract:

- entrants who have a background in the subject or a related subject area, acquired through previous study (a bachelor's degree with honours or equivalent)
- entrants who have acquired experience through work or other means that enables staff responsible for admissions to be confident of the candidate's ability to succeed in the programme.

In the case of integrated master's degrees, progression to the final two or three (in Scotland) years of the programme is normally determined two years before the intended year of completion and often requires higher grades than progression on the bachelor's degree with honours alone.

### **Relationship to further study or employment**

- graduates of specialised/advanced study master's programmes will normally be equipped to enter doctoral study in their discipline or to take up employment in both subject-related and generalist environments.

### **Characteristics of graduates**

Graduates of specialised/advanced study master's degrees typically have:

- i) subject-specific attributes
- an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the discipline informed by current scholarship and research, including a critical awareness of current issues and developments in the subject

- the ability to complete a research project in the subject, which may include a critical review of existing literature or other scholarly outputs.
- ii) generic attributes (including skills relevant to an employment-setting)

A range of generic abilities and skills that include the ability to:

- use initiative and take responsibility
- solve problems in creative and innovative ways
- make decisions in challenging situations
- continue to learn independently and to develop professionally
- communicate effectively, with colleagues and a wider audience, in a variety of media.

### **III Professional/practice master's**

**Examples:** MBA, MEd, MTL, LLM and some integrated master's.

#### **Programme characteristics**

Degree programmes in this category often have the following characteristics:

- learning tends to be structured and programme structure may be developed in collaboration with the relevant PSRB, or employer, and may include practical elements, such as fieldwork, placements or other opportunities for work-based learning, as well as a project undertaken through independent study
- they range from nine to 24 months' duration, based on a full-time mode of study
- in the case of integrated master's degrees that fall within this type, master's level study is integrated with study at the level of a bachelor's with honours degree within a single programme. The second characteristic above applies to the master's level part of the overall award
- they may be a pre-requisite for registration or entry to a profession in accordance with the requirements of the PSRB that recognises or accredits the award
- other awards, such as Postgraduate certificate and Postgraduate diploma, will often be offered alongside professional/practice master's programmes to facilitate continuing professional development at different stages of a professional career.

#### **Programme purposes**

Programmes in this category may have the following aims:

- to enable graduates to qualify for entry into a profession, subject to any further conditions required by the PSRB
- to provide continuing professional development opportunities related to particular professions or employment settings.

### **Intended entrants**

Requirements for entry to a professional/practice master's programme (including the circumstances in which accreditation of prior knowledge, understanding and skills may be used) will be defined by the institution and may take account of the relevant PSRB's requirements. However, programmes in this category often attract:

- entrants with a bachelor's degree with honours (or equivalent) or experience which may or may not be directly relevant to the particular profession
- some professional/practice master's will require entrants to be engaged in particular professions as a condition of entry to the programme
- entrants who have acquired experience through work or other means that enables staff responsible for admissions to be confident of the candidate's ability to succeed in the programme.

### **Relationship to further study or employment**

- graduates of professional/practice master's programmes will normally be equipped to enter a variety of types of employment and in particular will possess the skills and experience necessary for the particular profession or area of practice
- graduates will also normally be equipped to continue academic study at a higher level, for example for a PhD/Phil or a professional doctorate.

### **Characteristics of graduates**

Graduates of professional/practice master's degrees typically have:

- i) subject-specific attributes
  - an in-depth knowledge and understanding of their profession, informed by current practice, scholarship and research, including a critical awareness of current issues and developments in the subject and the profession
  - the ability to apply research to professional situations, both practical and theoretical
  - the ability to use a range of techniques and research methods applicable to their professional activities.
- ii) generic attributes (including skills relevant to an employment-setting)

A range of generic abilities and skills that include the ability to:

- use initiative and take responsibility
- solve problems in creative and innovative ways
- make decisions in challenging situations
- continue to learn independently and to develop professionally
- communicate effectively, with colleagues and a wider audience, in a variety of media.

## **Appendix 2a: Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7: master's degree (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)**

(Taken from *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2008.*)

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

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

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

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

And holders will have:

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

## **Appendix 2b: Descriptor for a qualification at level 11 (Scotland)**

(Taken from *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland, 2001.*)

### **General**

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

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

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

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

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

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

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

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

**and will have:**

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

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**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000

Fax 01452 557070

Email [comms@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:comms@qaa.ac.uk)

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