

Sector recognised standards in England

Paragraph 342 of the Office for Students' (OfS's) regulatory framework defines the 'sector recognised standards' that have been adopted in relation to those conditions of registration that relate in whole or in part to the standards applied to higher education. Paragraph 342 reads:

342. The sector recognised standards that will be used in relation to this condition are those that apply in England as set out in Table 1, and in paragraphs 4.10, 4.12, 4.15, 4.17 and 4.18, and in paragraphs 6.13-6.18, and in the Table in Annex C, in the version of 'The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies' published in October 2014 (FHEQ). These sector recognised standards represent the threshold academic standards for each level of the FHEQ and the minimum volumes of credit typically associated with qualifications at each level.

This definition applies to conditions B4 and B5 and further information about these conditions can be found in the regulatory framework.¹

The following sections of this document present the relevant parts of the definition without further commentary.

Table 1

Table 1: Examples of the typical higher education qualifications at levels of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree Awarding Bodies

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

Typical higher education qualifications awarded by degree awarding bodies within each level	FHEQ level ^a
Doctoral degrees (e.g. PhD/DPhil, EdD, DBA, DCLinPsy) ^b	8
Masters' degrees (e.g. MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7
Integrated masters' degrees (e.g. MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm) ^c	

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/the-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/

Typical higher education qualifications awarded by degree awarding bodies within each level	FHEQ level ^a
Primary qualifications (or first degrees) in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (e.g. MB ChB, MB BS, BM BS ^d ; BDS; BVSc, BVMS) ^e	
Postgraduate diplomas	
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) ^f /Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) ^g	
Postgraduate certificates	
Bachelors' degrees with honours (e.g. BA/BSc Hons)	6
Bachelors' degrees	
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland ^f	
Graduate diplomas	
Graduate certificates ^h	
Foundation degrees (e.g. FdA, FdSc)	5
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)	
Higher National Diplomas (HND) awarded by degree awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson ⁱ	
Higher National Certificates (HNC) awarded by degree awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson ⁱ	4
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)	

Notes to Table 1

- ^a The framework levels of the FHEQ are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher education in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).
- ^b Professional doctorate programmes include some taught elements in addition to the research dissertation. Practice varies but typically professional doctorates include postgraduate study equivalent to a minimum of three full-time calendar years with study at level 7 representing no more than one-third of this.
- ^c Integrated masters' degree programmes typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years in England, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7 of the FHEQ (i.e. at the level of the qualification). Thus study at bachelors' level is integrated with study at masters' level and the programmes are designed to meet the qualification descriptors in full at level 6 of the FHEQ and level 7 of the FHEQ.
- ^d These are all abbreviated forms for the degrees of Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery.

- ^e Primary qualifications in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years in England, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7 of the FHEQ (i.e. at the level of the qualification). Thus study at bachelors' level is integrated with study at masters' level and the programmes are designed to meet the qualification descriptors in full at level 6 of the FHEQ and level 7 of the FHEQ. For historical reasons the qualifications retain the title 'Bachelor' (see paragraph 4.17.5).
- ^f In April 2005, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, the Standing Conference of Principals, Universities UK and QAA issued a joint statement on the PGCE qualification title. The title Postgraduate Certificate in Education is reserved for those PGCE qualifications that are set at level 7 of the FHEQ and align with the qualification descriptor for level 7. The title Professional Graduate Certificates in Education is used for those PGCE qualifications that are set level 6 of the FHEQ and align with the FHEQ qualification descriptor at level 6.
- ^g [Not relevant in England]
- ^h [Not relevant in England]
- ⁱ In England, HNDs and HNCs may either be awarded by degree awarding bodies under a licence from Pearson (which allows them to devise, deliver and award Higher National qualifications themselves), or they may be awarded directly by Pearson. The majority of these qualifications are awarded by Pearson.

Paragraphs 4.10, 4.12, 4.15, 4.17 and 4.18

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

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

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

- knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study
- an ability to present, evaluate and interpret qualitative and quantitative data, in order to develop lines of argument and make sound judgements in accordance with basic theories and concepts of their subject(s) of study.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems related to their area(s) of study and/or work
- communicate the results of their study/work accurately and reliably, and with structured and coherent arguments
- undertake further training and develop new skills within a structured and managed environment.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility.

4.12 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5 on the FHEQ: Foundation degree

The descriptor provided for this level is for any foundation degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 5, including Diplomas of Higher Education, Higher National Diplomas, etc.

Foundation degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles of their area(s) of study, and of the way in which those principles have developed
- ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, including, where appropriate, the application of those principles in an employment context
- knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in the subject(s) relevant to the named award, and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in the field of study
- an understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- use a range of established techniques to initiate and undertake critical analysis of information, and to propose solutions to problems arising from that analysis
- effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences and deploy key techniques of the discipline effectively
- undertake further training, develop existing skills and acquire new competences that will enable them to assume significant responsibility within organisations.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making

4.15 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6 on the FHEQ: Bachelors' degree with honours

The descriptor provided for this level is for any bachelors' degree with honours which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 6, including bachelors' degrees, and graduate diplomas.

Bachelors' degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline
- an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
 - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline
 - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline
- an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge
- the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects
- critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem
- communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.

And holders will have:

- the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
 - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
 - decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts
 - the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

4.17 Degree for a descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7 on the FHEQ: Masters' degree

The descriptor provided for this level of the frameworks is for any masters' degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor should also be used as a reference point for other qualifications at level 7, including postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas.

Masters' degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

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

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

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

And holders will have:

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

4.18 Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8 on the FHEQ: Doctoral degree

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

Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems
- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches.

And holders will have:

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

Paragraphs 6.13-6.18

Titling conventions for qualifications

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

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

Level

6.15 In order to ensure that qualification titles accurately convey information about the level of the qualification:

- the titles 'honours' (for example, bachelors' degree with honours), 'master' (for example, Master of Arts) and 'doctor' (for example, Doctor of Philosophy) are used only for qualifications that meet, in full, the expectations of the qualification descriptors at level 6, level 7 and level 8 on the FHEQ (but see note to the masters' degree qualification descriptor)
- titles with the stem 'graduate' (for example, 'graduate diploma') are used for qualifications from courses of study that typically require graduate entry, or its equivalent, and have learning outcomes that match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at level 6 on the FHEQ
- titles with the stem 'postgraduate' (for example, 'postgraduate diploma') are restricted to qualifications where the learning outcomes of the course of study match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at level 7 on the FHEQ.

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

Volume of study

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

6.18 The title 'diploma' generally indicates a smaller volume of learning than a degree but a larger volume than certificates (and an associated differentiation in the range of intended learning outcomes). A range of diplomas and certificates are offered by higher education providers.

- Undergraduate diplomas (for example, DipHE) are differentiated from undergraduate certificates (for example CertHE) by both level and volume of study; the former are at level 5 of the FHEQ and the latter are at level 4 of the FHEQ.
- Graduate diplomas and certificates are at the same level (6 on the FHEQ) but are differentiated from each other by volume of study and learning outcomes. The title 'certificate' normally signifies learning outcomes which would imply study equivalent to at least one-third of a full-time academic year, and the title 'diploma' normally signifies study

equivalent to at least two-thirds of a full-time academic year at the relevant level (and/or, where credit is awarded, the volume of credit specified by the relevant credit framework).

- Postgraduate diplomas and certificates are at the same level (7 on the FHEQ) but are differentiated from each other by volume of study and learning outcomes. The title 'certificate' normally signifies learning outcomes which would imply study equivalent to at least one-third of a full-time academic year, and the title 'diploma' normally signifies study equivalent to at least two-thirds of a full-time academic year at the relevant level (and/or, where credit is awarded, the volume of credit specified by the relevant credit framework).

Table in Annex C

Annex C: Illustrative table of credit

This table is an illustration of credit arrangements. It sets out the typical credit values associated with the design of courses for the main higher education qualifications awarded by degree awarding bodies in England.

Values shown in column 3 are the minimum that are typically associated with the qualification (plus any permissible minimum or maximum at a specified level shown in parentheses). In many cases the credits for qualifications will exceed the minimum.

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	Level	Typical credit values
PhD/DPhil	8	Not typically credit rated
Professional doctorates (only if credit based) (EdD, DBA, DClinPsy)		540 (360 at level 8)
Research masters' degrees (e.g. MRes, MPhil)	7	Not typically credit rated
Taught masters' degrees (e.g. MA, MSc)		180 (150 at level 7)
Integrated masters' degrees (e.g. MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm)		480 (120 at level 7)
Primary (or first) qualifications in medicine (e.g. BM BS), dentistry (e.g. BDS) and veterinary science (e.g. BVSc)		Not typically credit rated
Postgraduate diplomas		120 (90 at level 7)
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)		60 (40 at level 7)
Postgraduate certificates		60 (40 at level 7)
Bachelors' degrees with honours (e.g. BA/BSc Hons)		6
Bachelors' degrees	300 (60 at level 6)	
Postgraduate Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)	60 (40 at level 6)	
Graduate diplomas	80 (80 at level 6)	

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	Level	Typical credit values
Graduate certificates		40 (40 at level 6)
Foundation degrees (e.g. FdA, FdSc)	5	240 (90 at level 5)
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		240 (90 at level 5)
Higher National Diplomas (HND awarded by degree awarding bodies under licence from Pearson)		240 (90 at level 5)
Higher National Certificates (HNC awarded by degree awarding bodies under licence from England)	4	150 (120 at level 4)
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)		120 (90 at level 4)