

**Staff Guide
to
Qualification and Level Descriptors
for
Taught Programmes**

1. Overview

This document is designed to assist staff in programme and module design and development. It comprises two elements:

- (1) Annex 1: QAA Qualification Descriptors (Extract from QAA's Framework for HE Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, August 2008).
- (2) Annex 2: University of Bolton Level Descriptors (adapted from the NICCATS Level Descriptors).

It is important that the inter-relationship between qualification and level descriptors is understood and that the national and local context is borne in mind by academic staff when designing new pathways and modules or preparing existing or new pathways and modules for modification and review processes.

2. Annex 1: QAA Qualification Descriptors

These describe the characteristics and parameters of student learning and achievement for given **qualifications**. They are designed specifically to set and maintain national comparability of academic standards and consistency of expected student achievement for the **qualification** concerned. Note that the descriptor provided at each level of the FHEQ is for the complete qualification used as the exemplar at that level, which should therefore meet the descriptor in full. Each qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other full and smaller qualifications at that level.

They will therefore assist staff in developing **programme-level intended learning outcomes** that are appropriate for the proposed qualification.

3. Annex 2: University of Bolton Level Descriptors

These are designed primarily to assist academic staff in writing **individual modules**.

They should enable academic staff to:

- understand the achievement expected of learners at each level;
- incorporate level more effectively into the expression of specific module learning outcomes;
- design module assessments to ensure that sufficient opportunity is given for students to develop and demonstrate the intended learning outcomes for the module;
- produce detailed assessment criteria, grade and classification bandings;
- relate learning outcomes at module level to generic graduate outcomes;
- write stage-specific outcomes for programmes;
- assist learners in understanding their development as they progress through their programme of learning;
- assist academic staff in providing student feedback on progress against level benchmark standards.

QAA QUALIFICATION DESCRIPTORS

(extracted from the QAA's Framework for HE Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, August 2008)¹

1. DESCRIPTOR FOR A FULL QUALIFICATION AT LEVEL 4 (CERTIFICATE LEVEL)

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

CERTIFICATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

.... awarded to students who have demonstrated:

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

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

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

and will have:

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

Holders of a Certificate of Higher Education will have a sound knowledge of the basic concepts of a subject, and will have learned how to take different approaches to solving problems. They will be able to communicate accurately and will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility. The Certificate of Higher Education may be a first step towards obtaining higher level qualifications.

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/default.asp>

2. DESCRIPTOR FOR A FULL QUALIFICATION AT LEVEL 5 (INTERMEDIATE/DIPLOMA LEVEL)

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any Foundation Degree, which should meet the descriptor in full (and the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*²). This qualification descriptor can also be used as a reference point for other level 5 qualifications, including Diplomas of Higher Education, Higher National Diplomas, etc.

FOUNDATION DEGREE

.... awarded to students who have demonstrated:

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

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

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

and will have:

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

² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.asp>

Holders of qualifications at this level will have developed a sound understanding of the principles in their field of study, and will have learned to apply those principles more widely. Through this, they will have learned to evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems. Their studies may well have had a vocational orientation, for example HNDs, enabling them to perform effectively in their chosen field. Holders of qualifications at this level will have the qualities necessary for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and decision-making.

3. DESCRIPTOR FOR A QUALIFICATION AT LEVEL 6 (HONOURS)

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

BACHELOR'S DEGREE WITH HONOURS

.... awarded to students who have demonstrated:

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

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- (a) apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects;
- (b) critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate

questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem;

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

and will have:

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

Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements and to communicate them effectively.

Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.

Bachelor's degrees with honours form the largest group of higher education qualifications. Typically, learning outcomes for these programmes would be expected to be achieved on the basis of study equivalent to three full-time academic years and lead to awards with titles such as Bachelor of Arts, BA (Hons) or Bachelor of Science, BSc (Hons). In addition to bachelor's degrees at this level are short courses and professional 'conversion' courses, based largely on undergraduate material, and taken usually by those who are already graduates in another discipline, leading to, for example, graduate certificates or graduate diplomas.

4. DESCRIPTOR FOR A QUALIFICATION AT LEVEL 7 (MASTERS)

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

MASTER'S DEGREE

.... awarded to students who have demonstrated:

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

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

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

and will have:

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

Much of the study undertaken for master's degrees will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Students will have shown originality in the application of knowledge,

and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They will be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they will show originality in tackling and solving problems. They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

Master's degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses, programmes of research or a mixture of both. Longer, research-based programmes may lead to the degree of MPhil. The learning outcomes of most master's degree courses are achieved on the basis of study equivalent to at least one full-time calendar year and are taken by graduates with a bachelor's degree with honours (or equivalent achievement).

Master's degrees are often distinguished from other qualifications at this level (for example, advanced short courses, which often form parts of continuing professional development programmes and lead to postgraduate certificates and/or postgraduate diplomas) by an increased intensity, complexity and density of study. Master's degrees - in comparison to postgraduate certificates and postgraduate diplomas - typically include planned intellectual progression that often includes a synoptic/research or scholarly activity.

UNIVERSITY OF BOLTON MODULE LEVEL DESCRIPTORS: LEVELS HE0 TO HE7

(These descriptors are adapted from the NICCATS level descriptors³, which are summarised below and in the QAA's guidance on credit⁴. The descriptors should be seen as a developmental continuum in which preceding levels are necessarily subsumed within those which follow.

Level 3

- apply knowledge and skills in a range of complex activities demonstrating comprehension of relevant theories; access and analyse information independently and make reasoned judgements, selecting from a considerable choice of procedures, in familiar and unfamiliar contexts; and direct own activities, with some responsibility for the output of others.

Level 4

- develop a rigorous approach to the acquisition of a broad knowledge base; employ a range of specialised skills; evaluate information, using it to plan and develop investigative strategies and to determine solutions to a variety of unpredictable problems; and operate in a range of varied and specific contexts, taking responsibility for the nature and quality of outputs.

Level 5

- generate ideas through the analysis of concepts at an abstract level with a command of specialised skills and the formulation of responses to well-defined and abstract problems; analyse and evaluate information; exercise significant judgement across a broad range of functions; and accept responsibility for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes

Level 6

- critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, utilising specialised skills across an area of study; critically evaluate concepts and evidence from a range of sources; transfer and apply diagnostic and creative skills and exercise significant judgement in a range of situations; and accept accountability for determining and achieving personal and/or group outcomes

Level 7

- display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills, employing advanced skills to conduct research, or advanced

³ [NICCATS](#)

⁴ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit/creditframework.asp>

technical or professional activity, accepting accountability for related decision making, including use of supervision

Level 8 (for reference)

- make a significant and original contribution to a specialised field of inquiry, demonstrating a command of methodological issues and engaging in critical dialogue with peers and accepting full accountability for outcomes

KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING & INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner

- **Knowledge base:** has a given factual and theoretical knowledge base regarding the area being studied
- **Ethical issues:** is able to relate knowledge to personal beliefs and values

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner

- **Analysis:** can analyse straightforward data with guidance using given classifications/principles
- **Synthesis:** can collect and sort ideas and information in a predictable and standard format
- **Evaluation:** can evaluate data using defined techniques and tutor guidance
- **Application:** can apply given tools/methods under supervision to well defined problems and identify basic issues

TRANSFERABLE & PRACTICAL SKILLS

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner

- **Group working:** can work effectively as a member of a team and recognise obligations to others for example, tutors, peers, and colleagues
- **Learning resources:** can work within a defined context and can use and access a range of learning resources
- **Self evaluation:** can identify own strengths and weakness within given criteria
- **Management of information:** can manage information and collect appropriate data from given sources and undertake simple supervised research tasks
- **Autonomy:** can engage in self directed activity with appropriate support
- **Communications:** can communicate in a format appropriate to the task and report in a clear and concise manner
- **Problem solving:** can apply given tools/methods under supervision to well defined problems and identify basic issues

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner

- **Application of skills:** can operate in predictable, defined contexts requiring use of a limited range of standard techniques
- **Autonomy in skill use:** is able to act effectively under guidance or supervision within defined guidelines

LEVEL 4 (Certificate Level)

KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING & INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner

- **Knowledge base:** has a given factual and /or conceptual knowledge base with emphasis on the nature of the field of study and appropriate terminology
- **Ethical issues:** can demonstrate awareness of ethical issues in current areas of study and is able to discuss these in relation to personal beliefs and values

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner

- **Analysis:** can analyse with guidance using given classifications/principles
- **Synthesis:** can collect and categorise ideas and information in a predictable and standard format
- **Evaluation:** can evaluate the reliability of data using defined techniques and/or tutor guidance
- **Application:** can apply given tools/methods accurately and carefully to a well defined problem and begin to appreciate the complexity of the issues

TRANSFERABLE & PRACTICAL SKILLS

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner

- **Group working:** can work effectively with others as a member of a group and meet obligations to others (for example, tutors, peers, and colleagues)
- **Learning resources:** can work within an appropriate ethos and can use and access a range of learning resources
- **Self evaluation:** can evaluate own strengths and weakness within criteria largely set by others
- **Management of information:** can manage information, collect appropriate data from a range of sources and undertake simple research tasks with external guidance
- **Autonomy:** can take responsibility for own learning with appropriate support
- **Communications:** can communicate effectively in a format appropriate to the discipline(s) and report practical procedures in a clear and concise manner
- **Problem solving:** can apply given tools/methods accurately and carefully to a well defined problem and begins to appreciate the complexity of the issues in the discipline

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner

- **Application of skills:** can operate in predictable, defined contexts that require use of a specified range of standard techniques
- **Autonomy in skill use:** is able to act with limited autonomy, under direction or supervision, within defined guidelines

LEVEL 5 (Foundation Degree and Diploma Level)

KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING & INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner

- **Knowledge base:** has a detailed knowledge of major theories of the discipline(s) and an awareness of a variety of ideas, contexts and frameworks
- **Ethical issues:** is aware of the wider social and environmental implications of area(s) of study and is able to debate issues in relation to more general ethical perspectives

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner

- **Analysis:** can analyse a range of information with minimum guidance using given classifications/principles and can compare alternative methods and techniques for obtaining data
- **Synthesis:** can reformat a range of ideas and information towards a given purpose
- **Evaluation:** can select appropriate techniques of evaluation and can evaluate the relevance and significance of the data collected
- **Application:** can identify key elements of problems and choose appropriate methods for their resolution in a considered manner

TRANSFERABLE & PRACTICAL SKILLS

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner

- **Group working:** can interact effectively within a team/ learning group, giving and receiving information and ideas and modifying responses where appropriate
- **Learning resources:** can manage learning resources for the discipline. Can develop working relationships of a professional nature within the discipline(s)
- **Self evaluation:** can evaluate own strengths and weakness, challenge received opinion and develop own criteria and judgement
- **Management of information:** can manage information. Can select appropriate data from a range of sources and develop appropriate research strategies
- **Autonomy:** can take responsibility for own learning with minimum direction
- **Communications:** can communicate effectively in a manner appropriate to the discipline(s) and report practical procedures in a clear and concise manner in a variety of formats
- **Problem-solving:** can identify key areas of problems and choose appropriate tools / methods for their resolution in a considered manner

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner

- **Application of skills:** can operate in situations of varying complexity and predictability requiring application of a wide range of techniques
- **Autonomy in skill use:** able to act with increasing autonomy, with reduced need for supervision and direction, within defined guidelines

LEVEL 6 (Honours Degree and Advanced Diploma Level)

KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING & INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner

- **Knowledge base:** has a comprehensive/detailed knowledge of a major discipline(s) with areas of specialisation in depth and an awareness of the provisional nature of knowledge
- **Ethical issues:** is aware of personal responsibility and professional codes of conduct and can incorporate a critical ethical dimension into a major piece of work

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner

- **Analysis:** can analyse new and/or abstract data and situations without guidance, using a range of techniques appropriate to the subject
- **Synthesis:** with minimum guidance can transform abstract data and concepts towards a given purpose and can design novel solutions
- **Evaluation:** can critically evaluate evidence to support conclusions/recommendations, reviewing its reliability, validity and significance. Can investigate contradictory information/ identify reasons for contradictions
- **Application:** is confident and flexible in identifying and defining complex problems and can apply appropriate knowledge and skills to their solution

TRANSFERABLE & PRACTICAL SKILLS

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner

- **Group working:** can interact effectively within a team / learning / professional group, recognise, support or be proactive in leadership, negotiate in a professional context and manage conflict
- **Learning resources:** with minimum guidance can manage own learning using full range of resources for the discipline(s). Can work professionally within the discipline
- **Self evaluation:** is confident in application of own criteria of judgement and can challenge received opinion and reflect on action. Can seek and make use of feedback
- **Information management:** can select and manage information, competently undertake reasonably straightforward research tasks with minimum guidance
- **Autonomy:** can take responsibility for own work and can criticise it
- **Communications:** can engage effectively in debate in a professional manner and produce detailed and coherent project reports
- **Problem solving:** is confident and flexible in identifying and defining complex problems and the application of appropriate knowledge, tools / methods to their solution

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner

- **Application of skills:** can operate in complex and unpredictable contexts, requiring selection and application from a wide range of innovative or standard techniques
- **Autonomy in skill use:** able to act autonomously, with minimal supervision or direction, within agreed guidelines

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| LEVEL 7 (Postgraduate Masters Level) |
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KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING & INTELLECTUAL SKILLS

Development of Knowledge and Understanding (subject specific)

The learner

- **Knowledge base:** has depth and systematic understanding of knowledge in specialised / applied areas and /across areas and can work with theoretical / research-based knowledge at the forefront of their academic discipline
- **Ethical issues:** has the awareness and ability to manage the implications of ethical dilemmas and work proactively with others to formulate solutions
- **Disciplinary methodologies:** has a comprehensive understanding of techniques / methodologies applicable to their own work (theory or research-based)

Cognitive/Intellectual skills (generic)

The learner

- **Analysis:** with critical awareness can undertake analysis of complex, incomplete or contradictory areas of knowledge communicating the outcome effectively
- **Synthesis:** with critical awareness, can synthesise information in a manner that may be innovative, utilising knowledge or processes from the forefront of their discipline / practice
- **Evaluation:** has a level of conceptual understanding that will allow her / him critically to evaluate research, advanced scholarship and methodologies and argue alternative approaches
- **Application:** can demonstrate initiative and originality in problem solving. Can act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level, making decisions in complex and unpredictable situations

TRANSFERABLE & PRACTICAL SKILLS

Key/transferable skills (generic)

The learner

- **Group working:** can work effectively with a group as leader or member. Can clarify task and make appropriate use of the capacities of group members. Is able to negotiate and handle conflict with confidence
- **Learning resources:** is able to use full range of learning resources
- **Self evaluation:** is reflective on own and others' functioning in order to improve practice
- **Management of information:** can competently undertake research tasks with minimum guidance

- **Autonomy:** is independent and self critical learner, guiding the learning of others and managing own requirements for continuing professional development
- **Communications:** can engage confidently in academic and professional communication with others, reporting on action clearly, autonomously and competently
- **Problem solving:** has independent learning ability required for continuing professional study, making professional use of others where appropriate

Practical skills (subject specific)

The learner

- **Application of skills:** can operate in complex and unpredictable, possibly specialised contexts, and has an overview of the issues governing good practice
- **Autonomy in skill use:** is able to exercise initiative and personal responsibility in professional practice
- **Technical expertise:** has technical expertise, performs smoothly with precision and effectiveness; can adapt skills and design or develop new skills or procedures for new situations