University credit and qualifications framework (UCQF)\textsuperscript{1}

Introduction

1. In August 2008 QAA published a revised edition of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* and a new document *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*. The former is a part of the QAA Academic Infrastructure and the latter is a guidance document, intended to outline practice across the sector, and reflect changes at a European level as part of the Bologna process in relation to the amount and level of credit in degrees and other higher education awards.

2. The two publications presented an opportunity to review the University’s existing documentation on qualifications and credit, the new integrated University credit and qualifications framework (UCQF) is a result of this process and represents the University’s interpretation and implementation of the FHEQ and *Higher education credit framework for England*.

3. This document is intended to be complementary to the *Guidelines on the design of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes*.

FHEQ and Higher education credit framework for England

4. The FHEQ is a key part of the QAA’s approach to the issues of maintaining and enhancing academic quality. Alongside Programme Specifications, Subject Benchmarking Statements and the *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, the FHEQ is part of the Academic Infrastructure and as such is a key reference point for Audit Teams during Institutional Audit.

5. The full FHEQ can be found on the QAA website at: [http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/default.asp)

\textsuperscript{1} Revised document approved by the University Board for Teaching and Learning at its meeting of 12 July 2011
FHEQ Levels

6. The FHEQ has five levels: three undergraduate levels and two postgraduate levels.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FHEQ Level</th>
<th>Typical awards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Doctorates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Taught, Research &amp; Integrated Masters, MPhil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Honours Degrees, Graduate Diplomas and Certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Diplomas of HE, Foundation Degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Certificates of HE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualification descriptors

7. Each of the five levels has a corresponding ‘qualification descriptor’ which:
   - State the outcomes of the main qualification at each level. A successful student at that level will therefore be expected to be able to demonstrate these outcomes for the award of a particular qualification. Such outcomes will be of particular interest to those designing, approving and reviewing academic programmes (including Audit teams). They will need to be satisfied that, for any programme, the curriculum and assessments provide all students with the opportunity to achieve, and to demonstrate achievement of, the outcomes.
   - Demonstrate the nature of change between levels.
   - Provide clear points of reference for academic standards.

8. The qualifications descriptors are, of course, generic statements of the outcomes of study. Where subject benchmarking statements have been produced, these will provide further guidance on outcome expectations. Where no such statements have been produced, or where no one statement is relevant, the qualifications descriptors are a vital reference point.

9. The full text of the FHEQ qualification descriptors is given as Appendix 1.

Using the framework

10. Institutions must be able to demonstrate that each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the framework. A degree can properly be awarded only when the expectations of the relevant qualification descriptor have been met or exceeded.

11. Institutions should ensure that the name given to any qualification represents appropriately the level of achievement, reflects accurately the field(s) of study, and is not misleading. Institutions should use the titles 'honours', 'masters' and 'doctor' only for

---

2 Prior to the revised FHEQ in 2008 the levels were designated by letters – C, I, H, M, D – corresponding with 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. These now map on to the National Qualification Framework (NQF) which covers all education outside of HE.
qualifications that meet in full the expectations of the qualification descriptors at levels 6, 7 and 8 respectively.

12. Institutions will be expected to be able to demonstrate that all students will gain, on successful completion, qualifications that are awarded in accordance with the framework.

13. Under the Institutional Audit methodology, reviewers will wish to see how institutions have embedded the FHEQ into their programme structures, and into their programme approval and monitoring procedures.

Credit

14. The Higher education credit framework for England, is the first attempt to draw together sector-wide practice on the amount and type of credit for typical awards made under the FHEQ.

15. For all of the most commonly given awards it specifies the FHEQ level, minimum total credits, and minimum number of credits at the level of the award.

16. The Higher education credit framework for England is not part of the Academic Infrastructure and is therefore not binding in the same way as the FHEQ, it does however provide useful information on the amount and type of credit typically required for a particular award.

The University credit and qualifications framework (UCQF)

17. The University credit and qualifications framework (UCQF) is an integrated device which intends to combine the FHEQ, Higher education credit framework for England and the University’s own regulations relating to credit and qualifications. It is the overarching description of the qualifications and awards which the University provides to students.

18. Schools should therefore ensure that not only do their programmes meet the relevant FHEQ qualifications descriptor, but also that particular qualifications meet with the University’s credit requirements – both are part of the UCQF.

19. Further detailed requirements for particular programmes, and regulations relating to parts of awards and progression are given in the Guidelines on the design of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Abbreviations</th>
<th>FHEQ Level</th>
<th>Min. total credits</th>
<th>Min. credits at level of qual.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Doctorate</td>
<td>DBA, DStat, EngD, EdD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Route PhD</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Under review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPhil/LLM by research</td>
<td>MPhil, LLM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPhil by examination</td>
<td>MPhil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Master</td>
<td>MA, MSc, MA(Res), MSc(Res), MRes, LLM, MBA, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>180</td>
<td>150³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated Masters Degree</td>
<td>MEng, MMet, MMath, MChem, MPPharm, MPhys etc.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>120⁴⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma</td>
<td>PGDip</td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
<td>90⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Certificate</td>
<td>PGCert</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Certificate in Education</td>
<td>PGCE</td>
<td></td>
<td>180</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Graduate Certificate in Education</td>
<td>PCGE</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree with Honours</td>
<td>BA/BSc/BA(Ed) LLB, BEng (Hons)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree (Ordinary)</td>
<td>BA etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>60⁷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Diploma</td>
<td>GradDip</td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Certificate</td>
<td>GradCert</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation Degree</td>
<td>FDEd, FDSci</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>100⁸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma of Higher Education</td>
<td>DipHE</td>
<td></td>
<td>240</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate of Higher Education</td>
<td>CertHE</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation Year in Science</td>
<td>No final award</td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120⁹</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ To be met by all new programmes from May 2009, and for all existing programmes from September 2010.
⁴ This was set at 100 level 7 credits for programmes starting before 2006-07.
⁵ Integrated Masters must also include a minimum of 100 credits at Level 6.
⁶ To be met by all new programmes from May 2009, and for all existing programmes from September 2010.
⁷ With a minimum of 100 credits at Level 5.
⁸ To be met by all new programmes from May 2009, and for all existing programmes from September 2010.
⁹ Can include some level 4 credits.
International Foundation Programme

| IFP | F'dation | 140 | 140 |

‘Lesser’ awards

20. Qualifications may only be awarded to mark the achievement of positively defined outcomes, not as compensation for failure at a higher level, or by default. A lower qualification can be awarded if a student is able to demonstrate the outcomes set out in a qualification descriptor.

21. For example, this allows the University to award an MPhil to a candidate examined for a PhD if the candidate does not meet the standard for a doctoral award, but only if they can demonstrate that they meet the outcomes of the Level 7 qualifications descriptor.

Awards not listed in the UCQF

22. All programmes resulting in a University award should normally be designed to fulfil the requirements of one of the above listed qualifications.

23. Credit bearing individual or combinations of modules which are offered to students but do not meet the requirements of any of the above listed qualifications can result in an award of University credit represented by a ‘Certificate of credit’. The certificate should bear the University’s device and state the amount and level of the credit achieved, and the title of the module or modules studied. In these circumstances a programme specification is not required but module descriptions should be in place and appropriately approved. The module or modules can be advertised as ‘validated by the University of Reading’.

24. Should it be intended that individual modules be able to act as ‘building blocks’ towards a qualification listed in the UCQF then this needs to be captured in the programme specification of an existing programme (if appropriate), or a new, specifically designed, programme specification will need to be created. The new or amended programme will need to be approved in accordance with normal procedures.

25. In certain circumstances the University may approve a programme resulting in an award which is not listed in the UCQF. If a School wishes to develop such a programme it should explain why an award outside of the UCQF is required in the programme approval documentation. Justification may, for example, relate to a long standing programme which has strong external recognition in its current form or the institution of a newly required or recommended qualification from a professional body.

26. In all cases where a programme is created leading to an award which is not listed in the UCQF, the following should be adhered to:
   a. No award can be made for study of less than 30 credits (see paragraph 23 above regarding alternative ‘Certificates of Credit’ in these circumstances)
   b. Caution should be taken in the use of qualification titles that have commonly accepted meanings in the higher education sector such as ‘certificate’ or ‘diploma’. When these are used they should always be qualified, normally with the word ‘Professional’ i.e. ‘Professional Certificate’ although other qualifiers are acceptable if required or preferred by an external professional body.
   c. Where there are two related awards ‘Certificate’ should be used in relation to the lesser of the two awards and ‘Diploma’ in relation to the higher.
   d. A separate programme specification should be in place.
Non-credit bearing programmes

27. If a programme or short course is offered that is not credit bearing it is important that the following conventions are followed to avoid any confusion with formal University awards:

a. Programmes should not be titled or advertised as a ‘Certificate’ or ‘Diploma’ unless in receipt of external professional recognition or accreditation which specifies the use of that title.

b. Programmes can be advertised as ‘recognised by the University of Reading’ but not ‘accredited’ or ‘validated’.

c. Participants can be issued with a ‘Certificate of attendance’ (if not assessed) or ‘Certificate of completion’ (if assessed).

Using the UCQF

28. The UCQF is expected to play a major part in all of the following processes.

Programme development and programme specifications

29. Further detailed requirements for particular programmes, and regulations relating to parts of awards and progression are given in the Guidelines on the design of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, but the following general principles apply:

Modules

30. Schools should, for each module in a programme, indicate its specific level in the ‘Programme Content’ section of each programme specification. This level must be appropriate to the relevant level of the UCQF and the related qualifications descriptor. For example, the majority of modules (making up at least 100 credits) in Part 3 of a Bachelor’s Degree programme will need to be pitched at Level 6.

31. Schools should therefore assure themselves that each module description is informed by the learning outcomes of the qualifications descriptor relevant to the level at which the module is pitched. It is no longer possible to offer the same module at two different levels. Similar module content can be taught at different levels but the modules should be assigned different module codes and a clear distinction in the intended learning outcomes and the assessment being made.

Programmes

32. All programmes and their programme specifications should be compliant with the UCQF and any revisions to these programmes should ensure that this compliance is retained.

33. Schools must ensure that the intended learning outcomes in their programme specifications match with the relevant qualification descriptor’. For example, Outcomes for Bachelor’s degrees with Honours should therefore meet the Level 6 outcomes.

34. You must also ensure that learning outcomes at the end of Part 1 and Part 2 meet the Level 4 and Level 5 outcomes respectively.

35. Schools should also ask themselves whether the programme curricula and the assessments allow all students the opportunity to achieve and demonstrate achievement of the outcomes.
36. Schools which offer Postgraduate Masters programmes, Integrated Masters programmes or Postgraduate Diplomas or Certificates, will need to ensure that such programmes are correctly positioned to meet the Level 7 descriptor.

New programme scrutiny

37. The University’s Support for and approval of programme initiatives and revisions to programmes also include guidance on addressing the UCQF. Scrutiny panels will consider:

- if the aims stated in the programme specification are translated into clear, appropriate and achievable learning outcomes throughout the parts of the programme;
- if it is clear how the aims and learning outcomes are to be achieved through the design and content of the curriculum;
- how the qualifications descriptors in the UCQF have informed the development of the programme and its intended learning outcomes; and
- whether the stated learning outcomes of the programme are appropriate for the level of award with regard to the relevant qualifications descriptor.

38. Faculty Boards for Teaching and Learning should assure themselves that Schools have addressed the UCQF when approving final versions of new programme specifications;

Periodic review

39. The University’s Requirements for the periodic review of programmes includes guidance on addressing the UCQF. Periodic review panels will consider:

- whether the aims and intended learning outcomes of the degree programmes, as stated in programme specifications, are clear and appropriate, and whether key transferable skills been identified;
- whether the aims are translated into appropriate and attainable learning outcomes throughout the parts of the programme
- whether the programme team has addressed the UCQF;
- whether the learning outcomes are appropriate to the relevant qualifications descriptor in the UCQF;
- whether it is clear that the aims and learning outcomes are attained;
- the evidence that the standards achieved by learners meet the minimum expectations for the awards, as measured against any relevant subject benchmarking statements and the UCQF.

QAA Institutional Audit

40. The FHEQ is a vital reference point within the Institutional Audit and the UCQF is the University’s main mechanism for implementing the FHEQ.

41. Institutional Audit team will essentially make judgements in several areas (QAA Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland), of which the most relevant to the UCQF are:

- the effectiveness of an institution’s internal quality assurance structures and mechanisms, in the light of the UK Academic Infrastructure and the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG), and the
way in which the quality of its educational provision and academic standards of its awards are regularly reviewed and resulting recommendations implemented. This provides public information on an institution’s soundness as a provider of HE qualifications of national and international standing:

- the accuracy and completeness of the information that an institution publishes about the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision, including the published teaching quality information (TQI).

42. Audit teams will:

‘…draw upon the Academic Infrastructure [which includes the FHEQ] as a source of external reference points when considering an institution’s approach to the management of the security of academic standards and the quality of its provision…. Teams will be looking for evidence that institutions have carefully considered the purpose and intentions of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure, have reflected on their impact on institutional practice, and have taken, or are taking, any necessary measures to best reflect in institutional practice the guidance provided by the Academic Infrastructure.’

‘…wish to look at how institutions check the alignment between the academic standards of their awards and the levels referred to in the FHEQ. Teams will be able, for example, to see how this is effected in practice through the sampling audit trails.’

43. Auditors will be therefore assess whether:

- learning outcomes are appropriate for the level of the qualification;
- whether learning outcomes are enabled and achieved by the programme offered;
- whether learning outcomes are achieved by the students taking the programme.

44. The auditors will expect that the programmes under review have learning outcomes which are appropriate to the level of qualification and award, and which meet the relevant Qualifications Descriptor.
Appendix 1

FHEQ Qualification descriptors

Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 4: Certificate of Higher Education

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.

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.

Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5: Foundation Degree

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any Foundation Degree which should meet the descriptor in full. 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 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.

**Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6: Bachelor's degree with 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 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.

Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7: Master's degree
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 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.
Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8: Doctoral degree

The descriptor provided for this level of the FHEQ is for any doctoral degree which should meet the descriptor in full. This qualification descriptor can 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.