

# England Higher Education System<sup>1</sup>

---

## Types of Higher Education Institutions

### Universities and University Colleges

Not all higher education institutions have the right to use the title 'university', which is regulated by law. There are two routes to securing this right:

- Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, the Privy Council is responsible for approving the use of the word 'university' (including 'university college'). Prior to 2005, there was an additional requirement of research degree awarding powers.
- Institutions may also obtain approval for the use of the word 'university' in their names under the provisions of the Companies Act 2006.

Since 2005, institutions that have taught degree awarding powers and at least 4 000 full-time equivalent students, of whom at least 3 000 are registered on degree (including Foundation Degree) level courses have also been permitted to apply to use the title 'university'. Following on from the proposals set out in the White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011), the requirement was reduced to 1 000 full-time students and subsequently, in 2012/13 ten long-established specialist institutions, which were mainly former arts, agricultural or teacher training colleges, gained university title.

Institutions that award taught degrees but which do not meet the numerical criteria for university title may apply to use the title 'university college', although not all choose to do so.

### Other Higher Education Providers

#### Higher Education Institutions

A higher education institution (HEI) is defined as i) a university, or ii) an institution conducted by a higher education corporation, or iii) a institution designated as eligible to receive support from funds administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (aside from Further Education Colleges, which are defined below). At present, all English HEIs with the exception of the University of Buckingham and the University of Law receive support from funds administered by HEFCE and are listed here. HEFCE directly funds 128 HEIs.

There are over 700 colleges and other institutions in the UK which do not have degree awarding powers, but which provide complete courses leading to

---

<sup>1</sup> Tomado de EuroEducation.net. The European Education Directory. <http://www.euroeducation.net/prof/ukco.htm>

recognised UK degrees. Courses at these institutions are validated by institutions which have degree awarding powers. These other providers of higher education programmes may use other institutional titles such as 'college'. The use of such titles is not regulated by law.

### **Further Education Institutions**

Higher education programmes are also provided in over 250 further education colleges, ranging from those with fewer than 50 students to those with nearly 4000. Such programmes are normally designed and approved directly by a higher education institution with degree awarding powers, under a formal recognition arrangement. Some short-cycle programmes are awarded by a national awarding body. Higher education provision in further education institutions may either be funded directly by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), or alternatively via a franchise arrangement. A franchise arrangement, which can cover all or part of a programme, means that a student is registered at a higher education institution, which receives the funding and is responsible for quality assurance. The HEI then passes a proportion of the funding to the further education college providing the teaching.

### **Alternative Providers**

Higher education is also provided in an increasing number of independent private institutions, including both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, which receive no direct government funding. Also termed 'alternative providers', these are defined as any provider of higher education courses which: is not in direct receipt of recurrent funding from HEFCE or from equivalent bodies in the Devolved Administrations; or does not receive direct recurrent public funding (for example, from a local authority, or from the Secretary of State for Education); and is not a further education college.

### **First Cycle Programmes**

First cycle programmes include bachelor's degrees with honours – the largest group of higher education qualifications – and other qualifications at Level 6 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). See the article on 'Bachelor'.

First cycle programmes also include Foundation Degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education and Higher National Diplomas and other qualifications at Level 5 of the FHEQ

The FHEQ also includes some higher education qualifications at a lower level. Higher National Certificates, Certificates of Higher Education and other qualifications at Level 4 of the FHEQ

### **Branches of Study**

The largest group of higher education qualifications at this level are bachelor's degrees with honours – often known as honours degrees. Bachelor's degrees can also be awarded without honours, in which case they may be known as 'ordinary'

or 'pass' degrees. Programmes leading to a bachelor's degree are normally of three or four years' duration for full-time students. Three years is more common, but four-year programmes are more common for languages and for 'sandwich' courses that include a year abroad or a work experience year. Most, but not all, higher education institutions (HEIs) use credit-based systems in the design and management of curricula and the standards of qualifications, and share a common understanding of credit and usage of 120 credits to denote a volume of learning that a learner will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes in an academic year. Bachelor's degrees with honours have a typical total volume of at least 360 credits, and bachelor's degrees awarded without honours have a typical total volume of at least 300 credits.

Degree awarding institutions are responsible for the design of their own programmes and awards (see the 'Introduction' to this topic). The number of different courses offered is very high, running into tens of thousands, though the number has reduced in recent years. Programmes typically focus on a particular subject area, but there are also combined studies programmes involving two, or possibly three, specialisations. There is also normally choice within each programme. Typically, a relatively fixed menu of modules covers the core knowledge of the subject, and is combined with a menu of options in the more specialised aspects of the subject area.

Note that the terminology used in this area varies considerably, as higher education is a diverse sector made up of autonomous providers which use different approaches to the definition of academic regulations. Some of these different approaches can be summarised as follows:

- A student registers on a course made up of compulsory modules and optional modules that leads to the award of a qualification.

- A student registers on a programme made up of compulsory modules and optional modules that leads to the award of a qualification.
- A student registers on a course that awards credit that can be counted towards a qualification.

Although many institutions offer courses across the full range of subject areas, some specialise in certain fields, such as music, art or business. Institutions which were originally set up as, for example, institutes of technology, but which subsequently gained university title, tend to retain a strong focus on their original specialism. Additional funding is available to encourage diversity, for example for specialist colleges and certain subjects identified as strategically important but vulnerable because of low student numbers.

## **Admission Requirements**

### **Admissions Policies and Entry Requirements**

Institutions determine their own admissions policies and the minimum entry requirements for each programme. For bachelor's degrees, the minimum entry

requirement is usually two or three General Certificate of Education Advanced-level (GCE A level) passes, as well as a minimum number of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grade C or above. These remain the most common form of entry qualification held by young entrants to higher education. A wide range of other qualifications is acceptable for entry. They include the International Baccalaureate and some vocational options such as GCE A levels in applied subjects and Edexcel BTEC National Qualifications.

There is a points scoring system establishing agreed comparability between different types of qualification across the whole of the UK – the UCAS tariff.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not obliged to express their entry requirements in terms of tariff points. Those that do may additionally require some or all of the qualifications for entry to be in specific subjects and at specific grades. An applicant who meets the published minimum admission requirements for a particular programme may be offered a place, but this is not guaranteed. Entry is competitive, with wide variations between institutions and programmes in terms of the competition for places. For some highly oversubscribed programmes, such as medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and law, applicants may be required to take an additional admissions test. Examples of such tests include the BioMedical Admissions Test and the UK Clinical Aptitude Test. From 2013, all applicants for initial teacher training courses are required to pass skills tests in numeracy and literacy before starting their courses.

Most HEIs do not routinely interview applicants for most programmes. However, applicants for entry to professional and vocational programmes such as initial teaching training and medicine are usually required to attend a selection interview, as are all applicants to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Information on programmes and entry requirements is available from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). UCAS is the single organisation responsible for managing applications to all full-time undergraduate (first cycle) programmes in the UK. UCAS is funded by participating HEIs and from the fees paid by each applicant.

### **Alternative Access Routes**

The Access to Higher Education Diploma provides another route for mature entrants. See the subheading 'Access to Higher Education' in the article 'General Programmes' in the 'Adult Education and Training' topic.

Most institutions also welcome applications from mature candidates who have had appropriate experience but may lack formal qualifications. Many institutions give credit for prior study and informal learning acquired through work or other experiences: Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).

## **Fair Access and Widening Participation**

Fair access and widening participation are government policy objectives.

Widening participation is defined by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) as improving under-representation at a national level; it covers not only young people from low income backgrounds but all those from groups under-represented in higher education, taking into account issues facing disabled students, ethnic minorities and part-time and mature students.

Fair access is defined by OFFA as equality of opportunity for all those who have the potential to benefit from higher education, irrespective of their background, schooling or income. The term is often used with reference to admission to the most selective institutions.

## **Control of Student Numbers**

Overall student numbers for the higher education sector are planned by the Government and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Based on Government guidance, HEFCE sets each institution a limit – or ‘student number control’ – on the number of students it may recruit. The purpose of these targets is to enable the Government to control the level of publicly funded student loans and grants for fees and maintenance. Not all students are included in the student number control. In line with Government aims to encourage popular and successful universities and colleges to expand and to improve student choice, universities and colleges are permitted to recruit as many students with high grades (currently ABB or above at A level, and certain equivalent qualifications) as they wish, outside of their student number control. HEFCE has developed an ‘exemptions list’ of entry qualifications and grades which are exempt from the student number control. Information on the student number control and the range of exempt qualifications and grades is available on HEFCE’s website.

## **Curriculum**

Institutions have the autonomy to design and develop their own programmes of study. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) provides subject benchmark statements explaining the core competencies at honours degree level in a range of disciplines, which are intended to assist those involved in programme design, delivery and review.

The QAA also provides guidance on programme design and approval for higher education institutions in Chapter B1 of its Quality Code for Higher Education.

## **Teaching Methods**

Teaching methods are decided by the individual teacher, department, faculty or institution, or a combination of these. Most courses involve both formal lectures and less formal seminars, in which students are encouraged to participate and lead discussions. Certain courses require practical sessions such as work in a laboratory for science subjects and oral classes for foreign languages.

The four UK higher education funding bodies fund the Higher Education Academy (HEA) which supports the higher education community in order to enhance the quality and impact of learning and teaching. The HEA provides academic staff with professional recognition, networking and development opportunities, and advice and support, including by working directly with Higher Education Institutions to understand their individual circumstances and priorities.

Open and distance learning is increasingly available. The Open University, which specialises in 'open supported learning', admitted its first students in 1971 and is now a major provider of distance learning and the UK's largest university in terms of student numbers. Other institutions also increasingly offer courses on this basis.

### **Progression of Students**

Each institution has its own regulations governing student progression within a programme. The Quality Assurance Agency provides guidance in its UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning. The Code recommends that each institution should publicise and implement clear rules and regulations for progressing from one stage of a programme to another and for qualifying for an award. Guidance at institutional and programme level that includes reference to the following can support implementation of this recommendation:

- the extent to which a student's overall success in a programme can include failure in part of the programme, where this is permitted by institutional rules and regulations. In modular systems, guidance can helpfully distinguish between core and optional modules and include details about any modules that must be passed to meet Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body requirements. It is important to ensure that students receiving an award have achieved or exceeded the learning outcomes for the programme
- defining which marks contribute to the decision about whether a student receives an award
- on what basis retakes or resubmissions can occur, making clear the number and timing permitted and the accompanying procedures; for example, resitting examinations; resubmitting a dissertation; repeating a work-based or other type of practical assessment; or repeating an oral examination
- the rules for deferring or not completing an assessment, together with any special assessment conditions or penalties that may apply, including any restriction on the marks, grades or levels of award that can be obtained on the basis of retaken or deferred assessments. It is helpful if such rules cover a wide range of circumstances, including any progression permitted or awards conferred because of a student's absence due to illness or other personal circumstances.

## Employability

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has defined employability as ‘a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure that they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy’. This definition is cited in *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work*, a 2009 joint publication from Universities UK and the CBI, illustrating how universities and business can work together to help equip graduates for their future working lives.

Improving the quality of relationships between business and the higher education sector is a policy priority for the Government. A *Review of Business-University Collaboration* (Wilson, 2012) called for universities to be at the heart of the economy, to promote growth in the UK and to improve the employability of graduates and described many different ways in which these relationships can be effective. See also the subheading ‘New Skills for New Jobs’ in the article ‘Education in the Europe 2020 Strategy’.

The National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB), formerly the Council for Industry and Higher Education, aims to facilitate collaboration between higher education and business by harnessing the talent and research and development strength of both for economic benefit.

Graduate apprenticeships are sector-specific frameworks which integrate study at degree or diploma level with structured work-based learning focused on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), NVQ vocational units and key skills units. The aim is to enhance entry into the labour market through a framework of learning opportunities.

The Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) is a partnership between the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). It supports institutions to engage in a broad range of activities with business, public sector and community partners.

HEFCE also has a workforce development programme which has two related goals: the design and delivery of HE courses in partnership with employers, and increasing the number of learners in the workplace supported by their employers. Details of employer engagement projects focused on the development and delivery of higher education programmes with the cooperation of employers are available from HEFCE.

All institutions make provision for careers guidance for students who wish to take advantage of it.

Student achievements other than academic achievements may be recorded using the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which is described below under the subheading 'Certification'.

### **Student Assessment**

Assessment procedures are decided by the individual institution. They typically involve a range of methods. QAA provides guidance on good practice in its Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B6.

External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining nationally comparable standards within autonomous higher education institutions. The assessment procedures include the appointment of one or more external examiners for each subject. Their role is to give an additional opinion on the performance of candidates for degrees and thus ensure compatibility of standards between universities, and that the examination system and the award of degree classifications is fairly operated. These examiners are usually senior members of the teaching staff of a similar department in another university. QAA provides guidance in its Quality Code for Higher Education. Chapter B7 covers arrangements for External Examining.

### **Certification**

Subject to the status of their degree awarding powers (see the 'Types of Higher Education Institutions' article) institutions are responsible for their own awards, the conditions on which they are awarded and qualification titles.

Guidance is provided by the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The FHEQ forms part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

The Framework includes qualification descriptors that set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of bachelor's degrees. Qualification titles for bachelor's degrees include:

- Bachelor of Arts, abbreviated to BA
- Bachelor of Science, abbreviated to BSc
- Bachelor of Education, abbreviated to BEd.

Institutions traditionally use the same system of classifying (i.e. grading) student attainment in programmes leading to a bachelor's degree with honours. The honours degree classification system has four points on the honours degree scale: first class; second class (subdivided into upper second 2:1 and lower second 2:2); and third class. In addition, institutions may award a 'pass' degree which does not carry honours, or a fail.

Bachelor's degrees awarded with honours may be designated thus: BA (Hons), BSc (Hons) etc.

In recent years there has been debate about replacing the honours degree classification system. Although a widely acceptable alternative has not been found, a complementary initiative has gained acceptance. In 2007, the sector representative bodies Universities UK and GuildHE published *Beyond the Honours Degree Classification: the Burgess Group Final Report*. This recommended the introduction of a new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), building upon the European Diploma Supplement (DS), to enable institutions to provide a fuller record of student achievement. The HEAR is an electronic document providing a record of students' achievement during their time in higher education as well as an overall summative judgement – whether the honours degree classification, grade point average or any other – verified by the institution. The HEAR follows the structure of the Diploma Supplement but in its purpose and timing provides a different emphasis. From 2012/13, the sector representative bodies Universities UK and GuildHE have recommended its introduction by all member organisations.

### **Short-Cycle Higher Education**

These are first cycle qualifications below the level of a bachelor's degree. In many respects, including the arrangements for student financial support, the same arrangements apply as for bachelor's degrees.

### **Foundation Degrees**

Foundation Degrees were introduced in September 2001, following proposals announced by the Secretary of State in February 2000 and a prospectus issued by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2000. The aim was to address the shortage of intermediate-level skills and to widen participation in higher education and stimulate lifelong learning. Foundation Degrees are designed with a particular area of work in mind, with the help of employers from that sector to equip students with the relevant knowledge and skills for business. They cover a wide range of subjects, from engineering and e-commerce to health and social care and veterinary nursing.

They are predominantly delivered through partnerships of further and higher education institutions. Foundation Degree awarding powers are described in the article on 'Types of Higher Education Institutions'.

Foundation Degrees are at Level 5 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). All Foundation Degrees are expected to meet the generic statement of outcomes set out in the qualification descriptor for Foundation Degrees within the FHEQ. The qualification descriptor sets out broad expected outcomes for a Foundation Degree in terms of what graduates should be able to demonstrate and the wider abilities that they would be expected to have developed.

A full-time course usually takes two years. Study methods can be very flexible, which means that they are available to people already in work, those wishing to embark on a career change as well as to those who have recently completed qualifications such as A levels or apprenticeships. Typically students have the opportunity to learn in the workplace as well as in the classroom.

Qualification titles include:

- Foundation Degree in Arts, abbreviated to FdA
- Foundation Degree in Science, abbreviated to FdSc.

Foundation Degree awards are normally graded as pass, merit or distinction. On successful completion, it is possible to 'top up' the qualification to a bachelor's degree with honours, typically with an extra year of study.

### **Other Short Cycle Qualifications**

Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) are work-related (vocational) higher education qualifications designed to teach the skills required in a particular area of work. HNDs are at Level 5 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and typically take two years to complete full-time.

These awards are not protected by law. The awarding body is Pearson Edexcel, an awarding body for academic and vocational qualifications across the UK.

Other types of higher education award, such as Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE) are not generally protected by law and may be granted by any organisation. Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE) are at Level 5 of the FHEQ.

Most, but not all, higher education institutions use credit-based systems in the design and management of curricula and the standards of qualifications, and share a common understanding of credit and usage of 120 credits to denote a volume of learning that a learner will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes in an academic year. Foundation Degrees, HNDs and DipHEs have a typical total volume of at least 240 credits, which equate to approximately 120 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits.

### **Second Cycle Programmes**

Second cycle programmes involve learning at a higher, more challenging level than an undergraduate degree. Second cycle qualifications at Level 7 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) include master's degrees (such as MSc and MA) and postgraduate diplomas and certificates. These are generally taught programmes, although they may have a research element. Much of this article relates to master's degrees, though there is also information below on short programmes.

While the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the seven Research Councils both have responsibilities regarding research (see the articles on 'Higher Education Funding' and 'Types of Higher Education Institutions' for further details), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has a remit to develop a coordinated approach to policy, funding and participation issues in postgraduate education

## Branches of Study

### Master's degrees

Degree awarding institutions are responsible for the design of their own programmes and awards (see the article on 'Types of Higher Education Institutions') and the number of different courses offered is very high. Master's degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses or programmes of research, or a combination of both. 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. Master of Arts (MA) courses are normally in arts, social sciences, business or humanities subjects. A Master of Science (MSc) is awarded for science and social science courses. Other taught master's courses include the Master of Business Administration (MBA) and the Master of Education (MEd). There are also Master of Research (MRes) courses in science and social science subjects which combine broad training in research methods with a research project. Longer master's courses that typically involve a more substantial element of research or equivalent enquiry often lead to the degree of MPhil.

First degrees in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science comprise an integrated programme of study and professional practice spanning several levels. While the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves typically meet the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7 of the FHEQ, i.e. master's level, these qualifications may often retain, for historical reasons, titles of Bachelor of Medicine, and Bachelor of Surgery, Bachelor of Dental Surgery, Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine or Bachelor of Veterinary Science, and are abbreviated to MBChB or BM BS, BDS, BVetMed and BVSc respectively.

Integrated master's degrees exist in science, engineering, pharmacy and mathematics. These comprise an integrated programme of study spanning several FHEQ levels where the outcomes are normally achieved through study equivalent to four full-time academic years. While the final outcomes of the qualifications themselves meet the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at FHEQ level 7 in full, such qualifications are often termed 'integrated master's' as an acknowledgement of the additional period of study at lower levels (which typically meets the expectations of the descriptor for a higher education qualification at FHEQ level 6).

Most, but not all, higher education institutions use credit-based systems in the design and management of curricula and the standards of qualifications, and share a common understanding of credit and usage of 120 credits to denote a volume of

learning that a learner will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes in an academic year. Typically, taught master's degrees which have a minimum total of 180 credits equate to 90 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. Research master's degrees (e.g. MPhil) are not typically credit-rated. Integrated master's degrees comprising 480 credits, of which 120 credits are at level 7, equate to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level. For each of these master's qualifications, 120 of the UK credits (60 ECTS) must be at level 7 and the outcomes must meet the expectations of the Dublin descriptor at the second cycle level. (The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2011) indicates that Dublin descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that signify the completion of each cycle of education.)

### **Short programmes**

Second cycle programmes also include short courses and professional 'conversion' courses, usually taken by those who are already graduates in another discipline, leading to, for example, graduate certificates or graduate diplomas at level 6 of the FHEQ. They include the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) and the Graduate Diploma in Psychology (GDP). Short second cycle programmes can also include study at level 7 of the FHEQ, i.e. at master's level. For example, the PGCE, awarded for initial teacher training programmes, may have the full title of either the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (if pitched at level 6 of the FHEQ) or the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (if pitched at level 7). Students taking the second of these two routes gain credits at master's level that may be used towards a master's degree.

### **Admission Requirements**

Although individual institutions set their own admission requirements for master's programmes, many postgraduate courses require an upper second class bachelor's degree (2:1). Some courses expect students to have a certain amount of related work experience.

### **Curriculum**

Institutions have the autonomy to design and develop their own programmes of study. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) provides general guidance on programme design for higher education institutions in its Quality Code for Higher Education'. Chapter B11 covers requirements for research degree courses and Chapter B1 covers curriculum and programme arrangements expected for taught degree courses.

The QAA also provides subject benchmark statements explaining what achievement is expected at master's level, which are intended to assist those involved in programme design, delivery and review.

## Teaching Methods

Teaching methods for master's programmes are determined by course providers. They can include practical or research projects, lectures, seminars, tutorials, supervised laboratory work and work placements.

Open and distance learning is increasingly available. The Open University, which specialises in 'open supported learning', offers both taught master's and research master's degrees.

## Progression of Students

Each institution has its own regulations governing student progression within a programme. The QAA provides guidance in its Quality Code for Higher Education. See chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning.

## Employability

See the parallel subsection within the article 'Bachelor'.

## Student Assessment

Assessment procedures are decided by the individual institution. They typically involve a range of methods. QAA provides guidance on the assessment of taught modules and programmes in its 'Quality Code for Higher Education'. See Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning.

Assessment processes for research qualifications are quite different from those for taught awards and assessment for a master's degree by research will usually include some kind of oral examination. Guidelines on the assessment of research students are provided in Chapter B11 of the Quality Code for Higher Education.

External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining nationally comparable standards within autonomous higher education institutions. The assessment procedures include the appointment of one or more external examiners for each subject. Their role is to give an additional opinion on the performance of candidates for degrees and thus ensure compatibility of standards between universities, and that the examination system and the award of degree classifications are fairly operated. These examiners are usually senior members of the teaching staff of a similar department in another university. QAA provides guidance in its Quality Code for Higher Education. Chapter B7 covers arrangements for external examinations.

## Certification

Subject to the status of their degree awarding powers (see the article on 'Types of Higher Education Institutions') institutions are responsible for their own awards, the conditions on which they are awarded and qualification titles.

Guidance is provided by the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), developed by the Quality Assurance

Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Qualification descriptors set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of a master's degree.

Qualification titles for master's degrees include:

- Master of Philosophy, abbreviated to MPhil
- Master of Letters, abbreviated to MLitt
- Master of Research, abbreviated to MRes
- Master of Arts, abbreviated to MA
- Master of Science, abbreviated to MSc.

The Master of Arts (MA) granted by the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge are not academic qualifications. The MA is normally granted, on application, to graduates of these universities with a Bachelor of Arts (BA), who become eligible six–seven years after their initial matriculation at the university. No further study or assessment is required, but the recipient may be required to pay a fee.

### **Programmes outside the Bachelor and Master Structure**

There are also some short higher education programmes that are below the level of the programmes described in the article on 'Short-Cycle Higher Education'.

These include Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE) which are at level 4 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ).

These programmes typically take one year to complete full-time. They are intended to encourage the development of flexible learning pathways and in this way to facilitate lifelong learning. The Certificate of Higher Education may be a first step towards obtaining higher level qualifications.

### **Third Cycle (PhD) Programmes**

Doctoral degrees are at level 8 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ).

While the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the seven Research Councils both have responsibilities regarding research (see the articles on 'Higher Education Funding' and 'Types of Higher Education Institutions' for further details), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has a remit to develop a coordinated approach to policy, funding and participation issues in postgraduate education. Information on HEFCE's recent work in these respects is available from its website, including a 2013 overview report on Postgraduate Education in England and Northern Ireland.

## Organisation of Doctoral Studies

The degree of Doctor of Philosophy, abbreviated to PhD (or DPhil in some universities) is awarded for the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, or application of existing knowledge in a new way, at the forefront of an academic discipline (e.g. in arts, social sciences, business, humanities or science subjects), usually through original research. Professional doctorates, which usually have the discipline name in the title awarded (e.g. EdD for Doctor of Education), also have a research component but this is coupled with a substantial taught element.

All doctoral degrees are expected to meet the generic statement of outcomes set out in the qualification descriptor for doctoral degrees in the FHEQ. The qualification descriptor sets out broad expected outcomes for a doctoral degree in terms of what graduates should be able to demonstrate and the wider abilities that they would be expected to have developed.

Doctoral programmes generally take three to four years full-time or five to seven years part time to complete. They are not typically credit-rated.

The majority of doctoral degrees are taken at universities and other higher education institutions. However, there are some opportunities for studying in partnership with a university, in government laboratories, hospital laboratories and research institutions.

Professional doctorates which combine a research component with a substantial taught core are available in some vocational areas for those interested in professional rather than academic careers. These lead usually to awards which include the name of the discipline in their title (e.g. EdD for Doctor of Education, DClinPsy for Doctor of Clinical Psychology, EngD or DEng for engineering and DBA for business). Many are accredited by professional bodies and paid for by employers.

The New Route PhD or integrated PhD combines research with a structured programme of training in research methods and transferable professional skills. Interim awards at diploma, certificate or master's level and professional qualifications may be offered in some programmes. It takes a minimum of four years full-time, six part-time to complete.

## Admission Requirements

Universities set their own admission requirements. Guidelines on the selection, admission and induction of students are available from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)'s Quality Code for Higher Education. Chapter B11 covers postgraduate research programmes. For doctoral research, applicants would normally be expected to have at least one of the following:

- an undergraduate degree with honours (usually class 2:1 or equivalent) in a relevant subject

- a relevant master's qualification or equivalent evidence of prior professional practice or learning that meets the higher education provider's criteria and guidelines for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and/or prior certificated learning (APCL). This may include, for example, the required amount of prior publications or other output specified for applicants for the award of PhD by published work.

### **Status of Doctoral Students/Candidates**

Doctoral students may have the status of students, or may hold an employment contract with their Higher Education Institution. There is no 'typical' model or status of student.

### **Supervision Arrangements**

Supervision arrangements are determined by the higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves. Guidelines are provided by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in its Quality Code for Higher Education. The guidelines are based on four principles:

- opportunities for access to regular and appropriate supervisory support
- encouragement to interact with other researchers
- advice from one or more independent sources, internal or external
- arrangements that protect the research student in the event of the loss of a supervisor.

### **Employability**

See the parallel subsection within the article 'Bachelor'.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England's overview report, Postgraduate Education in England and Northern Ireland (2013), indicates that the English funding council is involved in research commissioned by Universities UK during 2013/14 to investigate employability and employer–institution collaboration for taught postgraduate students, considering to what extent universities collaborate with employers in the design and delivery of masters courses, and the value that employers place on postgraduate-level skills, with the aim of informing future policy and practice. In addition, Research Councils UK, HEFCE and the other funding councils have commissioned research into the contribution of doctoral graduates in the workplace. This seeks to track doctoral graduates over a number of years to investigate their career pathways, their impact in employment and how they contribute to innovation and competitiveness.

Research students are encouraged to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning during and after their programme of study and to recognise the value of developing transferable skills. Chapter B11 of the QAA Quality Code for Higher

Education provides guidance on the support that should be offered to students on research degrees to develop employability skills.

## Assessment

Assessment processes for research qualifications are quite different from those for taught awards and usually include some kind of oral examination. Doctoral candidates are examined on the basis of an appropriate body of work and an oral examination (viva voce) in which they defend their thesis to a panel of academics who are experts in the field. Guidelines on the assessment of doctoral candidates are available from the QAA's Quality Code for Higher Education. Chapter B11 covers assessment within postgraduate research programmes.

External examining provides one of the principal means for maintaining nationally comparable standards within autonomous higher education institutions. The assessment procedures include the appointment of one or more external examiners for each subject. Their role is to give an additional opinion on the performance of candidates for degrees and thus ensure compatibility of standards between universities, and that the examination system and the award of degree classifications is fairly operated. These examiners are usually senior members of the teaching staff of a similar department in another university. QAA provides guidance in its Quality Code for Higher Education. Chapter B7 covers external examining.

## Certification

Subject to the status of their degree awarding powers (see the article on 'Types of Higher Education Institutions') institutions are responsible for their own awards, the conditions on which they are awarded and qualification titles.

Guidance is provided by the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Qualification descriptors set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of doctoral degrees.

Qualification titles for doctoral degrees include:

- Doctor of Philosophy, abbreviated to PhD or DPhil
- Doctor of Education, abbreviated to EdD
- Doctor of Clinical Psychology, abbreviated to DClinPsy
- Doctor of Engineering, abbreviated to EngD or DEng
- Doctor of Business Administration, abbreviated to DBA.

Honorary doctorates are not academic qualifications.