



# ROYAL SOCIETY OF CHEMISTRY

**Education Issues**

**Number Twenty-Two**

**Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications**

March 2003

**Education Issues is an occasional series of publications written for RSC members who, although not directly involved in education, are interested in developments within the education system.**

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## Introduction

In May 1996 the government with the support of other political parties set up a National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing. The RSC took an active role in the consultation process. The Committee's report - *Higher Education in the Learning Society* - was published in July 1997. One recommendation of the report was that the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) should - within the next two or three years - establish a common qualifications framework for the UK - not including Scotland, while seeking to establish a broad measure of comparability and equivalence with the different Scottish system of higher education. In Scotland the Garrick Report – produced by the Scottish committee - recommended a separate framework.

Three consultations were held. A *consultative paper on Qualifications Frameworks: Postgraduate Qualifications* published in November 1998 and *A consultative paper on Higher Education Qualifications Frameworks for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI)*, and for Scotland published in September 1999, and *Developing the framework: Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* published in November 2000.

## Purpose of the frameworks

Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications. As such the qualifications frameworks are designed to seek a consistent use of qualification titles.

The main purposes of the frameworks are:

- to enable employers, schools, parents, prospective students and others to understand the achievements and attributes represented by the main qualification titles;
- to maintain international comparability of standards, especially in the European context, to ensure international competitiveness, and to facilitate student and graduate mobility;
- to assist learners to identify potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning; and
- to assist higher education institutions, their external examiners and the QAA reviewers, by providing important points of reference for setting and assessing standards.

In the Scottish framework - because it is linked to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) - there is one other main point:

- to assist higher education institutions, learners and others to clarify potential routes for progression and credit transfer, particularly in the context of wider participation in lifelong learning.

### Framework levels

The framework in EWNI has five levels; three undergraduate and two postgraduate. In Scotland the framework has six levels.

(NB the labels H, M and D refer to Honours, Masters and Doctoral and are used consistently across the UK)

England, Wales and Northern Ireland framework levels		
1. Certificate	<b>C</b> level	Certificate of Higher Education
2. Intermediate	<b>I</b> level	Foundation degrees, Ordinary (Bachelors) degrees, Diplomas of Higher Education and other higher diplomas
3. Honours	<b>H</b> level	Bachelors degrees with Honours, Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas
4. Masters	<b>M</b> level	Masters degrees, Postgraduate Certificates and Postgraduate Diplomas
5. Doctoral	<b>D</b> level	Doctorates

Scottish framework levels (SHE = Scottish higher education level)	
<b>SHE 1</b>	Certificate of HE
<b>SHE 2</b>	Diploma of HE
<b>SHE 3</b> Scottish Bachelors degree	Qualifications that are typically for graduates or equivalent but are not of postgraduate level of outcome
<b>SHE H</b> Scottish Bachelors degree - Honours	Graduate Diploma Graduate Certificate
<b>SHE M</b>	MPhil Masters Masters (following an integrated programme from undergraduate to Masters level study) Postgraduate Diploma Postgraduate Certificate
<b>SHE D</b> PhD/DPhil	Other Doctorates

## The RSC's input

The RSC was in close consultation with QAA and responded to requests for evidence from the consultation processes and many, but not all, of the RSC's suggestions were included in the framework documents.

The RSC welcomed the recognition of the importance of the Bologna Declaration<sup>1</sup> and the impact that this is having on the restructuring of higher education in many parts of Europe. It is important that all Masters degrees awarded in the UK including those awarded following the completion of an integrated programme from undergraduate to Masters level (noting the exception of the historic Scottish MA) be truly 'second cycle' (graduate) qualifications in the terms of that Declaration. There is widespread recognition throughout continental Europe that a second cycle qualification constitutes the academic prerequisite for entry to a profession. This is the case in chemistry. The RSC recognised other important factors whose implementation it supported and welcomed – *ie* the proposed transition period is of the minimum necessary to complete the implementation of the qualifications frameworks by all institutions; postgraduate levels will be

the same throughout the UK and that 'at the highest undergraduate level – that at which honours degrees will be placed – there will be a broad equivalence between the two frameworks'. Another welcome decision is that there should be only two postgraduate levels associated with doctorates and masters respectively and the consequential decision not to have a 'higher masters'.

The EJNI framework does not include credit proposals. A guidance document has been prepared by a credit consortium but at present there is no requirement for implementation. The Scottish framework includes credits.

The frameworks have qualification descriptors for the main academic award at each level. The qualification descriptor is concerned with a holistic view of the generic achievements and abilities linked with a particular qualification. This contrasts with the approach of level descriptors that refer to each level and component that do not necessarily address the 'whole'.

The RSC considered that qualification descriptors were valuable to both prospective students and external stakeholders.

1. In June 1999 the education ministers of 29 European countries meeting in Bologna, Italy signed a declaration committing their country to adopt 'a common framework of readable and comparable degrees' and thus create 'a European space for higher education' by 2010. A framework

of comparable degrees is to be developed that takes in undergraduate ('first cycle') and postgraduate ('second cycle') qualifications. The latter of these is viewed as providing the level of educational attainment for future professional practitioners.

## Key points

The QAA issued the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and Scotland in February 2001. A number of the consultation suggestions were taken on board.

The following are some of the key points.

- The number of levels in the two frameworks remains different (five levels in EJNI and six levels in Scotland)
- The upper levels in both frameworks are now labelled H, M and D, and the qualification descriptors for postgraduate awards are identical.
- Credits remain in the Scottish framework but have been removed from the EJNI framework.
- The term 'extended undergraduate programme' has replaced 'integrated masters'.
- The implementation date is the start of the academic year 2003-2004.

## Qualification descriptors

Descriptors exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level, and demonstrate the nature of change between levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level, and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications. However, the framework has the flexibility to accommodate diversity and innovation and to accommodate new

qualifications as the need for them arises.

Qualification descriptors are in two parts.

- The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which students should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. For any programme, the curriculum and assessments should provide all students with the opportunity to achieve, and to demonstrate achievement of, the outcomes.
- The second part is a statement of the wider abilities that typical students could expect to have developed. This will be useful to employers and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of a certain qualification.

Qualification descriptors are generic statements of the outcomes of study. Further guidance on the expectations for degrees in particular can be found in subject benchmark statements. These have been produced for Honours levels, and will be produced for other levels, where there is a significant taught element in a subject.

Many academic programmes aim to develop general and specific skills. These are not explicitly addressed in the qualification descriptors, as many skills, and the extent to which they need to be developed, are discipline or profession specific. As such, they are addressed more appropriately in subject benchmark statements and individual programme specifications. See **Appendix 1** for an example of a descriptor.

## **Qualifications, volumes of learning and credit**

The framework is first and foremost a qualification framework, based upon the outcomes represented by the main qualification title. In EWNI the framework is not a credit framework and does not depend on the use of credit. In Scotland the framework is linked to the SQCF.

Higher education providers need to be able to demonstrate how the design of curricula secures academic and intellectual progression. However, it is for providers to decide how this is best demonstrated, whether by a credit structure or otherwise. There is no assumption that internal progression should be, or is best, demonstrated by reference to the descriptors of outcomes of intermediate qualifications not necessarily used by the institution. The framework is not a prescriptive model for the internal organisation of academic programmes.

The design of academic programmes has to make some assumptions about the amount of learning that is likely to be necessary to achieve the intended outcomes. In some cases this will be expressed as study time – eg a number of academic years, or through credit rating.

Within an overall programme the learning outcomes required for progression from one degree to another are unlikely to be achieved in less than one academic year's full-time study, which addresses those outcomes directly. For example, an extended undergraduate programme might have units of Masters level

credit equivalent to study over one half of an academic year. This is unlikely to be sufficient to enable a student to match fully the expectations of the Masters degree descriptor, in which case an Honours degree would be the appropriate award for successful completion of the programme. Achievement of the full Masters outcomes would be needed for the award of a Masters degree. Similarly, an ordinary degree programme that offered units of Honours level work equivalent to half a year's study only, would be unlikely to enable students to demonstrate achievement of full Honours level outcomes.

## **Assessment**

Effective and appropriate assessment is essential to the operation of an outcomes-based qualifications framework. It is the assessment of the outcomes of learning that is important rather than the nature of any component element of study. For example, a student may, in an appropriate learning environment, build up introductory material and be assessed against the outcomes of a qualification at a level above that associated with the introductory material alone.

## Appendix 1

### Example descriptor

#### Descriptor for a qualification at Honours (H) level:

#### Bachelors degree with Honours Honours degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

1. 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;
2. an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;
3. conceptual understanding that enables the student:
4. 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
5. to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;
6. an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;
7. the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources – eg 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.