



QAA

A brief guide to academic qualifications

Qualification descriptors

Guidance on the implementation of the framework

Qualification nomenclature

**The framework for higher education
qualifications in England,
Wales and Northern Ireland
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Contents

Section 1: Introduction	2
Section 2: Background	4
Section 3: Main features of <i>The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)</i>	6
The purpose of the FHEQ	6
The number of levels in the FHEQ	7
Relationship between the FHEQ and European developments	8
Table 1: Examples of the typical higher education qualifications at each level of the FHEQ and the corresponding cycle of the FQ-EHEA	10
Positioning qualifications within the FHEQ	12
Section 4: Qualification descriptors	14
Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 4: Certificate of Higher Education	15
Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 5: Foundation Degree	16
Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6: Bachelor's degree with honours	18
Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7: Master's degree	20
Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8: Doctoral degree	23
The relationship between qualification descriptors and other points of reference for academic standards	26
Assessment	27
Qualifications, volumes of learning and credit	27
Section 5: The FHEQ - implementation issues and guidance	30
Naming qualifications	30
Awarding qualifications	33
Annex A: Advisory group	34
Annex B: Shared Dublin descriptors for short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle awards	36
Annex C: Glossary of abbreviations	42

Section 1: Introduction

1 This guidance is about the implementation of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). It applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates) granted by a higher education provider¹ in the exercise of its degree awarding powers.

2 The FHEQ is an important reference point for providers of higher education. The FHEQ, and associated guidance for implementation, has been written to assist higher education providers to maintain academic standards; to inform international comparability of academic standards, especially in the European context; to ensure international competitiveness; and to facilitate student and graduate mobility. Higher education providers may find it useful to refer to the FHEQ in their discussions with the main stakeholders in higher education (prospective students, parents, schools and employers) about the outcomes and attributes that each qualification represents.

3 The fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment rather than years of study. Qualification descriptors are key to this premise. Qualification descriptors set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of individual qualifications. The qualification descriptors contained in the FHEQ exemplify the outcomes and attributes expected of learning that results in the award of higher education qualifications. These outcomes represent the integration of various learning experiences resulting from designated and coherent programmes of study. These qualifications, which develop graduates with high-level

¹ The term 'higher education provider' is used throughout as a generic term. Higher education providers are expected to act in accordance with the limits of their degree awarding powers and/or responsibilities as providers of higher education.

analytical skills and a broad range of competences, are therefore distinct from training or solely the acquisition of higher level skills.

4 The FHEQ is also used as a reference point in institutional audit/review and other forms of external review. Audit and review teams will examine the means which higher education providers use to ensure that their awards and qualifications are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in the FHEQ, and that higher education providers are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner. In particular, audit and review teams will wish to look at how higher education providers check the alignment between the academic standards of their awards and the levels referred to in the FHEQ. In this regard, the FHEQ should be regarded as a framework, not as a straitjacket.

5 Section three of this document describes the main features of the FHEQ, section four contains the qualification descriptors and section five provides guidance on specific aspects in the implementation of the FHEQ.

Section 2: Background

6 A national framework for higher education qualifications was proposed originally in the Dearing report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). The FHEQ was first published in 2001. It was developed and is maintained by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in accordance with the recommendations of the Dearing report. This second edition has been developed with the assistance of an Advisory group (Annex A) and incorporates feedback gained from extensive discussion and consultation with the HE sector and its stakeholders.

7 Higher education providers should be able to demonstrate that all students commencing programmes after the start of the 2003-04 academic year would gain, on successful completion, qualifications that were awarded in accordance with the FHEQ. The changes in this revised edition of the FHEQ are not such that it is expected that higher education providers would need to make significant changes to their programmes in order to align with this edition.

8 There is a parallel higher education qualifications framework document for Scotland² that reflects the features of its different education system, while making clear the many similarities and alignments with the framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The two frameworks share many core purposes and features. At the postgraduate levels, the two higher education frameworks have common structures, qualification titles and qualification descriptors. Below the postgraduate levels, the honours degree level in Scotland and level 6 in the FHEQ are considered to be in broad alignment. Below level 6, the frameworks reflect the particular features of the different educational structures and contexts.

9 Within the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland there are also frameworks of school and vocational qualifications managed by the

² The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland can be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/2001

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)³, and integrated overarching credit and qualifications frameworks in Scotland, *The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)*⁴ (of which *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* is a constituent part) and *The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)*⁵ (of which the FHEQ is a constituent part). See paragraph 19 for further information about the relationship between the credit and qualifications frameworks of the UK and Ireland.

10 Increasingly, higher education institutions, students and employers operate and compete in a European and international context. The frameworks for higher education qualifications throughout the UK are designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration⁶ and thus align with *The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)*⁷. As such, the labels used to distinguish the different levels of the FQ-EHEA (short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle) have also been incorporated into the FHEQ. Paragraph 20 provides further information about the relationship between the FHEQ and the FQ-EHEA. A *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)*⁸ has also been agreed by the European Commission and it is expected that the FHEQ will also be compatible with this framework.

³ Further information about QCA can be accessed at: www.qca.org.uk

⁴ Further information about the SCQF can be accessed at: www.scaf.org.uk

⁵ Further information about the CQFW can be accessed at: www.elwa.ac.uk/elwaweb/elwa.aspx?pageid=1612 (will migrate to www.wales.gov.uk)

⁶ *The Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education: an explanation* can be accessed at: www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf

⁷ Further information on *The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* can be accessed at: www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

⁸ Further information about the EQF can be accessed at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

Section 3: Main features of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*

The purpose of the FHEQ

11 Public confidence in academic standards requires public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications.

12 The main purposes of the FHEQ are to:

- provide important points of reference for setting and assessing academic standards to higher education providers and their external examiners
- assist in the identification of potential progression routes, particularly in the context of lifelong learning
- promote a shared and common understanding of the expectations associated with typical qualifications by facilitating a consistent use of qualifications titles across the higher education sector.

As a result, the FHEQ should enable higher education providers to communicate to employers; schools; parents; prospective students; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs); and other stakeholders the achievements and attributes represented by the typical higher education qualification titles.

13 QAA auditors and reviewers use the FHEQ as a reference point when auditing or reviewing the establishment and management of academic standards by higher education providers. In particular, auditors and reviewers look at how institutions align the academic standards of their awards with the levels referred to in the FHEQ. They also ascertain whether institutions have means of ensuring that awards and qualifications are of an academic standard at least consistent with the standards referred to in the FHEQ. Similarly, the

FHEQ is an important tool for PSRBs in defining and using qualifications in the context of their accreditation processes.

The number of levels in the FHEQ

Relationships between the frameworks of the UK and Ireland

14 The levels of the FHEQ, with examples of typical qualifications at each level, are represented in table 1 (see page 10).

15 In the UK and Ireland, each stage within any framework of qualifications, be it school, vocational, further or higher education, is commonly referred to as a 'level'. In practice, most such levels represent bands of qualifications that share similar expectations of attainment. The FHEQ has five levels, three of which are undergraduate and two are postgraduate. These are numbered 4-8, succeeding levels 1-3 which precede higher education in *The National Qualifications Framework and The Qualifications and Credit Framework* (NQF/QCF).

16 The FHEQ is a qualifications framework. Each level is illustrated by, and each award determined by reference to, a qualification descriptor (see Section 4). The qualification descriptors of the FHEQ reflect five distinct levels of intellectual achievements associated with the typical higher education qualifications awarded by higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in accordance with their degree awarding powers.

17 Typically, programmes leading to higher education qualifications, particularly those taken over a number of years, include learning that is progressively more challenging. For the award of a higher education qualification at a particular level, the outcomes of this learning must reflect, in an holistic way, the qualification descriptor for that level.

18 A complementary approach, used by some other frameworks within the UK and Ireland, is to use (credit) level descriptors to

determine the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy associated with a particular level of learning and achievement (see Section 4, paragraphs 58-63).

19 To convey the relative position of levels of achievement and/or qualifications, it is convenient to number them. However, there is a need to avoid confusion with the numbering of levels in the various frameworks of the UK and Ireland. The authorities responsible for the maintenance of credit and qualification frameworks of the UK and Ireland have produced a guide to comparing the main qualifications offered in each country - *Qualifications can cross boundaries*⁹. This guide enables comparisons to be drawn between qualifications and their levels, rather than direct equivalences.

Relationship between the FHEQ and European developments

20 Within the FQ-EHEA, the term 'cycle' is used to describe the three sequential levels identified by the Bologna Process (first cycle - which can include short cycle qualifications, second cycle and third cycle) within which all European higher education qualifications are located. In broad terms, the first cycle corresponds to undergraduate awards (typically bachelor's degrees), the second cycle and third cycles to postgraduate awards (typically master's degrees and doctoral degrees, respectively).

21 Similar to the FHEQ, the FQ-EHEA has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle, known as the 'Dublin descriptors'¹⁰. These illustrate the typical abilities and achievements associated with qualifications that signify the completion of each cycle. The Dublin descriptors are appended to this document as Annex B and may be used by higher education providers as an additional reference point.

⁹ *Qualifications can cross boundaries* can be accessed at: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/glacier/qual/qualifications_cross_countries_2008.PDF

¹⁰ The Dublin descriptors were originally developed by the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI). Further information about the JQI can be accessed at: www.jointquality.org

22 In many other European countries, as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a range of higher education qualifications are available to students who have undertaken a programme of study within the FQ-EHEA first cycle, but which do not represent the full extent of achievement for this cycle. These qualifications are referred to as higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) awards. Such awards may prepare students for employment while also providing preparation for, and access to, studies to completion of the first cycle.

23 Table 1 indicates the relationship between the **levels** of the FHEQ and the **cycles** of the FQ-EHEA. For the purpose of this document, the term 'levels' will be used throughout.

Table 1: Examples of the typical higher education qualifications at each level of the FHEQ and the corresponding cycle of the FQ-EHEA

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

Typical higher education qualifications within each level	FHEQ level*	Corresponding FQ-EHEA cycle
Doctoral degrees (eg, PhD/DPhil (including new-route PhD), EdD, DBA, DCLinPsy)**	8	Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Master's degrees (eg, MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Integrated master's degrees*** (eg, MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm)		
Postgraduate diplomas		
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)****		
Postgraduate certificates		
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg, BA/BSc Hons)	6	First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Bachelor's degrees		
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)****		
Graduate diplomas		
Graduate certificates		
Foundation Degrees (eg, FdA, FdSc)	5	Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)		
Higher National Diplomas (HND)		
Higher National Certificates (HNC)*****	4	
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)		

Notes to table 1

- * Formerly, in the 2001 edition of the FHEQ, the levels were identified as Certificate (C), Intermediate (I), Honours (H), Masters (M) and Doctoral (D) level.
- ** Professional doctorate programmes include some taught elements in addition to the research dissertation. Practice varies but typically professional doctorates include postgraduate study equivalent to a minimum of three full-time calendar years with level 7 study representing no more than one-third of this.
- *** Integrated master's degree programmes typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at level 7. Thus study at bachelor's level is integrated with study at master's level and the programmes are designed to meet the level 6 and level 7 qualification descriptors in full.
- **** In April 2005, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, the Standing Conference of Principals, Universities UK and QAA issued a joint statement on the PGCE qualification title. The full statement may be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/PGCEstatement.asp
- ***** Higher National Certificates (HNCs) are positioned at level 4, to reflect typical practice among higher education awarding bodies that award the HNC under licence from Edexcel.

Positioning qualifications within the FHEQ

24 When positioning higher education qualifications within the FHEQ, higher education providers will wish to assure the public that the achievements represented by qualifications are appropriate and represented consistently. Higher education providers are responsible for demonstrating that each of their qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ. In considering the appropriate level for a qualification, higher education providers consider:

- the relationship between the intended outcomes of the programme and the expectations set out in the qualification descriptors
- whether there is a sufficient volume of assessed study that will demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been achieved
- whether the design of the curriculum and assessments is such that all students following the programme have the opportunity to achieve and demonstrate the intended outcomes.

When designing and approving programmes, higher education providers will wish to ensure that a coherent learning experience is delivered and that due consideration is given to the precept and explanatory text relating to programme design in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*¹¹. In addition, higher education providers will wish to take account of the regulatory and other requirements of the PSRBs which accredit specific professional programmes.

25 Not all higher education qualifications will meet the qualification descriptors in full. For example, table 1 lists the **typical** higher education qualifications at each level but not all of the qualifications at each level will meet all of the expectations of the

¹¹ The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* can be accessed at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp

qualification descriptor. The qualifications are differentiated by the volume of learning and this in turn leads to variation in the range of intended learning outcomes. Some qualifications (for instance Foundation Degrees) have been specifically designed to facilitate progression to subsequent levels. Section four provides further information about the qualification descriptor for each level of the framework and gives examples of qualifications that meet each descriptor in full, and where the qualification descriptor can be used as a reference point for other qualifications at the same level.

26 Further guidance, designed to assist institutions in achieving consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, nature and subjects of study is available under 'Naming qualifications', paragraphs 65-75.

Section 4: Qualification descriptors

27 Descriptors exemplify the nature and characteristics of the main qualification at each level, and comparison demonstrates the nature and characteristics of change between qualifications at different levels. They provide clear points of reference at each level and describe outcomes that cover the great majority of existing qualifications. However, the FHEQ has the flexibility to accommodate diversity and innovation, and to accommodate new qualifications as the need for them arises.

28 Qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first part is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed and which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part will be of particular relevance to higher education providers in designing, approving and reviewing academic programmes. 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 intended outcomes.

29 The second part is a statement of the wider abilities that the typical student could be expected to have developed. It will be of assistance to higher education providers during discussions with employers, and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of the qualification.

30 Each descriptor sets out the outcomes for the typical qualification at each level - for levels 6, 7 and 8 this is usually a degree. 'Naming qualifications', paragraph 69, provides further guidance on the naming of qualifications and specifically the use of the title 'degree' for both undergraduate and postgraduate awards at all levels.

31 At most levels there may be more than one type of qualification which can be achieved. Short programmes are often offered as continuing professional development opportunities. The qualification

descriptors provide points of reference that will help institutions determine at which level of the FHEQ any qualifications resulting from such programmes should be placed. The guidance on naming qualifications (paragraphs 65-75) may be used to determine an appropriate title. A range of qualifications are encompassed by each level of the FHEQ. Each level is deliberately broad to provide flexibility and space for the development of new qualifications, for example, occupationally related awards.

32 QAA will keep under review the need for any additional qualification descriptors, or amendment to them, in the light of the development of other points of reference, such as benchmark statements or European developments, for example arising from the Bologna Process.

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.

33 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.

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.

34 The Foundation Degree is an example of a qualification that meets, in full, the expectations of the qualification descriptor (and the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*)¹².

¹² The *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* (2004) can be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.asp

35 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.

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.

36 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.

37 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.

38 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.

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.

39 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.

40 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).

41 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.

42 Some master's degrees, for example in science, engineering and mathematics, comprise an integrated programme of study spanning several 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 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 level 6).

43 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, 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.

Note

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). No further study or assessment is required, but the recipient may be required to pay a fee.

At the University of Oxford, the MA may be granted during or after the twenty-first term from matriculation and at the University of Cambridge, the MA may be granted six years after the end of the first term.

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.

44 Doctoral degrees are awarded for the creation and interpretation, construction and/or exposition of knowledge which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research.

45 Holders of doctoral degrees will be able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Holders of doctoral degrees will have the qualities needed for employment that require both the

ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields and an innovative approach to tackling and solving problems.

46 Doctoral programmes that may include a research component but which have a substantial taught element (for example, professional doctorates), lead usually to awards which include the name of the discipline in their title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education or DClInPsy for Doctor of Clinical Psychology). Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge.

47 The titles PhD and DPhil are commonly used for doctoral degrees awarded on the basis of original research.

48 Achievement of outcomes consistent with the qualification descriptor for the doctoral degree normally requires study equivalent to three full-time calendar years.

49 Higher doctorates may be awarded in recognition of a substantial body of original research undertaken over the course of many years. Typically a portfolio of work which has been previously published in a peer-refereed context is submitted for assessment. Most higher education awarding bodies restrict candidacy to graduates or academic staff of several years' standing.

Note

Honorary doctoral degrees are not academic qualifications.

The relationship between qualification descriptors and other points of reference for academic standards

50 Qualification descriptors are linked to other parts of the Academic Infrastructure¹³ in the following ways.

51 **Qualification descriptors** are generic statements of the intended outcomes of study. 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.

52 More detailed statements on the expected outcomes in particular subjects can be found in **subject benchmark statements**. These have been produced for typical and threshold standards in bachelor's degrees with honours, and have been produced for other levels where there is significant taught provision in a subject (for example, MEng). A single qualifications benchmark statement has also been produced to provide a reference point for the Foundation Degree qualification¹⁴.

53 In areas where there is no benchmark statement, or where more than one such statement may be relevant, the statements of generic outcomes contained in the qualification descriptors provide a particularly important point of reference.

54 Specific statements about the intended outcomes of an individual programme are provided by institutions in **programme specifications**. These define the specific outcomes of learning for a qualification in a particular subject area offered by that institution.

¹³ Further information about QAA's Academic Infrastructure can be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure

¹⁴ Further information about the Foundation Degree qualifications benchmark can be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.asp

55 The achievements of an individual student on a given programme are recorded in a **transcript** and on completion of a programme of study a **Diploma Supplement** will be issued.

Assessment

56 Effective and appropriate assessment is essential to the operation of a qualifications framework based on learning outcomes. 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 on introductory material and be assessed against the outcomes of a qualification at a level above that associated with the introductory material alone.

57 See also the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 6: Assessment of students*, particularly precept 8 which deals with rules and regulations for progressing from one stage of a programme to another and for qualifying for an award. See also the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, particularly precept 1 which deals with general principles¹⁵.

Qualifications, volumes of learning and credit

58 The FHEQ is a qualifications framework, based on the outcomes represented by the main qualification titles. It is not a credit framework, nor is it dependent on the use of credit. Nevertheless, credit is widely used by higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

¹⁵ The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* can be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure

59 In England, the Burgess Group¹⁶ published recommendations on national arrangements for the use of academic credit in higher education in England and the subsequent Credit Issues Development Group has drawn up a national credit framework and provided guidance in accordance with these recommendations. While the framework and guidance are advisory and their application remain a matter for individual institutions to decide on at their discretion, English institutions that elect to use credit are strongly encouraged to read, in conjunction with the FHEQ, *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*¹⁷.

60 In Wales, all higher education institutions have signed up to the CQFW *Credit Common Accord*¹⁸. Welsh institutions are encouraged to read, in conjunction with the FHEQ, the recommendations and guidelines as set out in the CQFW *Credit Common Accord*.

61 For any qualification, study leading directly to the qualification will normally build on learning from earlier stages of a programme of study, or from other assessed prior learning. Providers of higher education programmes need to be able to demonstrate how the design of curricula facilitates 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 demonstrated by reference to

¹⁶ Further information about the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Scoping Group and the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group (known collectively as 'The Burgess Group') may be found in the Burgess Group's final report, *Proposals for national arrangements for the use of academic credit in higher education in England*, which can be accessed at: http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/Burgess_credit_report.pdf

¹⁷ Further information about *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* can be accessed at: www.qaa.ac.uk/england/credit/guide.asp

¹⁸ Further information about the CQFW *Credit Common Accord* can be accessed at: www.elwa.ac.uk/elwaweb/elwa.aspx?pageid=2752 (will migrate to www.wales.gov.uk)

the descriptors of outcomes of intermediate qualifications, if these are not offered by the institution. It is not the purpose of the FHEQ to prescribe the internal organisation of academic programmes.

62 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 in terms of study time, for example a number of academic years. In other cases this will be expressed through credit. The FHEQ itself does not specify minimum or typical volumes of learning by reference to units of credit. However, the credit frameworks for both England and Wales provide guidance on the credit volumes associated with the typical qualifications at each level of the FHEQ. The guidance in these credit frameworks can also support a consistent approach to academic standards across the higher education sector.

63 The outcomes associated with a qualification should be understood in an holistic way, and their achievement should be demonstrated directly. However, different qualifications within the same level will have different volumes of learning which will lead to a different range of learning outcomes. For example, a 'degree' can properly be awarded only when the expectations of the relevant qualification descriptor have been met or exceeded. Within an overall programme, the intended learning outcomes required for a degree are unlikely to be achieved in less than the equivalent of one academic year's full-time study. Diplomas generally indicate a smaller volume of learning than a degree but a larger volume than certificates (and an associated differentiation in the range of intended learning outcomes). A range of diplomas and certificates are offered by higher education providers. If positioned at level 7 they are titled postgraduate certificates and diplomas and if positioned at level 6 they are titled graduate certificates and diplomas; other certificates and diplomas will generally be positioned at levels 4 or 5. See 'Naming qualifications' (Section 5) for guidance on the nature of qualification titles and specifically use of the title 'degree'.

Section 5: The FHEQ - implementation issues and guidance

64 The following guidance identifies key matters that a higher education provider should be able to demonstrate it is addressing effectively through its own quality assurance mechanisms. The accompanying explanatory text is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but for many higher education providers it will constitute appropriate good practice.

Naming qualifications

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

65 Public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications requires a transparent use of qualification titles. The following guidance is designed to assist institutions in achieving clarity and consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey information about the level, nature and subjects of study.

Level

66 To ensure that the name given to any qualification within the FHEQ appropriately represents its level, and to promote public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications, clarity in the use of qualification titles is required. The following guidance is designed to assist higher education providers in achieving clarity and consistency in the ways in which qualification titles convey accurately information about the level of the qualification:

- the titles 'honours' (for example, bachelor's degree with honours), 'master' (for example, Master of Arts) and 'doctor' (for example, Doctor of Philosophy) should be used only for

qualifications that meet, in full, the expectations of the qualification descriptors at level 6, level 7 and level 8 respectively

- titles with the stem 'postgraduate' (for example, postgraduate diploma) should be restricted to qualifications where the learning outcomes of the programme of study match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at level 7 or above
- titles with the stem 'graduate' (for example, graduate diploma) should be used for qualifications from programmes of study that typically require graduate entry, or its equivalent, and have learning outcomes that match relevant parts of the descriptor for a qualification at level 6.

67 A programme leading to a graduate certificate or graduate diploma might have some level 7 outcomes, but use of the 'postgraduate' title for the award would be justified only if most or all of the outcomes were assessed at level 7.

68 A qualification from a short, non-degree programme, having outcomes that correspond to some aspects of a qualification descriptor, might be placed at the same level as the main qualification to which that descriptor refers. For example, a short course might have outcomes requiring the demonstration of understanding and critical awareness of some current problems at the forefront of an area of professional practice, but not a practical understanding of techniques of research. An institution might reasonably determine that the qualification should be at level 7. In this instance, the title 'postgraduate diploma' or 'postgraduate certificate' could be used.

Nature

69 The titles Foundation **Degree**, bachelor's **degree with honours**, master's **degree** and doctoral **degree** should be used only in respect of qualifications at levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 respectively, which are awarded for achievement in full of the outcomes set out in the relevant qualification descriptor. For Foundation Degrees, at level 5,

the qualification should also meet the expectation of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*.

70 Use of the abbreviated titles PhD and DPhil should be restricted to qualifications where assessment is solely by a final thesis or published work; or by artefact or performance that is accompanied by a written commentary placing it in its academic context.

71 The abbreviated title MPhil should normally be reserved for qualifications awarded following extended master's courses that typically involve a substantial element of research or equivalent enquiry.

72 When used with the stems 'graduate' or 'postgraduate', the title 'certificate' should normally signify learning outcomes which would imply study equivalent to at least one-third of a full-time academic year, and the title 'diploma' should normally signify study equivalent to at least two-thirds of a full-time academic year.

Subject

73 Titles used for doctoral qualifications awarded after programmes that include a substantial taught element should normally include the name of the discipline in the title (for example, EdD for Doctor of Education).

74 Qualification titles that reflect the subject focus of programmes of study in two disciplines (for example, a joint honours award) should consider nomenclatures based on:

- 'A and B', where there is an approximately equal balance between two components
- 'A with B' for a major/minor combination where the minor subject accounts for at least a quarter of the programme.

75 Qualification titles should not normally reflect more than three subject components. Where there are more than three significant components, the title 'Combined Studies' would be appropriate.

Awarding qualifications

Qualifications are awarded to mark the achievement of positively defined outcomes, not as compensation for failure at a higher level, or by default.

76 Failure at a higher level does not mean that a lower qualification cannot be awarded. However, where a student does not demonstrate the outcomes set out in a qualification descriptor, a lower qualification should only be awarded if the student has demonstrated the outcomes required for that qualification.

77 Higher education providers ensure that:

- the outcomes required for each of their qualifications are specified clearly
- achievement of those outcomes is demonstrated before a qualification is awarded
- assessment procedures that permit compensation or condonation are not applied in a way that might allow a qualification to be awarded without achievement of the full outcomes being demonstrated.

Annex A: Advisory group

Membership

Mr Keith Bartlett	Deputy Principal	Norwich University College of the Arts
Ms Helen Bowles	Policy Advisor	GuildHE
Ms Sarah Butler	Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
Ms Siobhán Greenan	Higher Education Policy Officer	Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
Dr Nick Harris	Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA
Professor Alex Hughes (Chair)	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, External	University of Kent
Professor Stuart Laing	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic Affairs	University of Brighton
Professor Derek Longhurst	Chief Executive	<i>fdf</i> (Foundation Degree Forward)
Dr Anne Miller	Director of Quality Support	Liverpool John Moores University
Dr Jayne Mitchell	Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group	QAA

Ms Rachel Mooney	Senior credit manager, HE	Welsh Assembly Government
Professor Bob Munn	Retired; formerly Vice-President, Teaching and Learning	University of Manchester
Professor Gill Nicholls	Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic	University of Salford
Ms Rowena Pelik	Director of Academic Development	Napier University
Professor Ella Ritchie	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching & Learning)	Newcastle University
Mr Wes Streeting	Vice-President, Education	National Union of Students
Mr Greg Wade	Policy Advisor	Universities UK

Annex B: Shared Dublin descriptors for short cycle, first cycle, second cycle and third cycle awards¹⁹

The FQ-EHEA has generic qualification descriptors for each cycle, known as the 'Dublin descriptors'. These have been developed as a set and are intended to be read with reference to each other. They are primarily intended for use in the alignment of qualifications and hence national frameworks. National frameworks may themselves have additional elements or outcomes, and may have more detailed and specific functions.

The Dublin descriptors were built on the following elements:

- knowledge and understanding
- applying knowledge and understanding
- making judgements
- communications skills
- learning skills.

The Dublin descriptors offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle. They are not meant to be prescriptive; they do not represent threshold or minimum requirements and they are not exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted. The descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification. The descriptors are not subject specific nor are they limited to academic, professional or vocational areas. For particular disciplines the descriptors should be read within the context and use of language of that discipline. Wherever possible, they should be cross-referenced with any expectations/competencies published by the relevant community of scholars and/or practitioners. Further elaboration of the existing elements and/or introduction of new

¹⁹ Previously referred to as bachelor's, master's and doctoral awards.

elements will be part of the evolution of them as reference points to the FQ-EHEA.

The Dublin descriptors appear below (source: www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf) and may be used by higher education providers as an additional reference point.

Qualifications that signify completion of the higher education short cycle (within the first cycle) are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education²⁰ and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks; such knowledge provides an underpinning for a field of work or vocation, personal development, and further studies to complete the first cycle;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in occupational contexts;
- have the ability to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems;
- can communicate about their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients;
- have the learning skills to undertake further studies with some autonomy.

Qualifications that signify completion of the first cycle are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon and their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;

²⁰ **General secondary education** also includes vocational education with a sufficiently general component.

- can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional²¹ approach to their work or vocation, and have competences²² typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;
- have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;
- can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

Qualifications that signify completion of the second cycle are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research²³ context;

²¹ The word '**professional**' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile/specification.

²² The word '**competence**' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a 'yes/no' assessment.

²³ The word '**research**' is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The word is used in an inclusive way to accommodate the range of activities that support original and innovative work in the whole range of academic, professional and technological fields, including the humanities, and traditional, performing, and other creative arts. It is not used in any limited or restricted sense, or relating solely to a traditional 'scientific method'.

- can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;
- have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;
- can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously;
- have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;
- have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;
- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas;
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;
- can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

From 1st cycle (eg Bachelors) to 2nd cycle (eg Masters) to doctorates: the differences/'step changes' between the respective Dublin descriptors

The Joint Quality Initiative has also compared the descriptors and identified the step changes found between cycles in each of these elements.

	knowledge and understanding...
[short cycle	...in a field of study that builds upon general secondary education and is typically at a level supported by advanced textbooks]
1st cycle	[that is] supported by advanced text books [with] some aspects informed by knowledge at the forefront of their field of study...
2nd cycle	provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas...often in a research context...
Doctorates	[includes] a systematic understanding of their field of study and mastery of the methods of research associated with that field...
	application of knowledge and understanding...
[short cycle	often in occupational context]
1st cycle	[through] devising and sustaining arguments...
2nd cycle	[through] problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts...
Doctorates	[through the] ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity...[that has] made a contribution that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work some of which merits national or international refereed publication...

	ability to make judgements...
[short cycle	to identify and use data to formulate responses to well-defined concrete and abstract problems]
1st cycle	[through] gathering and interpreting relevant data...
2nd cycle	the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete data...
Doctorates	[through] critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas...
	ability to communicate...
[short cycle	their understanding, skills and activities, with peers, supervisors and clients]
1st cycle	information, ideas, problems and solutions...
2nd cycle	their conclusions and the underpinning knowledge and rationale to specialist and non-specialist audiences...
Doctorates	with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise...
	learning skills...
[short cycle	to undertake further studies with some autonomy]
1st cycle	needed to study further with a high level of autonomy...
2nd cycle	to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous...
Doctorates	expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement...

Annex C: Glossary of abbreviations

CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
EQF	European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FQ-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
PSRBs	Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

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