

Generic Masters Grade descriptors

These generic grade descriptors form the foundation of the assessment of all students undertaking level 7 programmes at the University of Worcester, including Postgraduate certificates, diplomas, MAs, MBAs and MScs. They are necessarily couched in generic language since they have to be applicable to a broad range of academic disciplines, courses and programmes. Course and Programmes teams will develop more specific criteria within the broad approaches set by these generic descriptors and modules may, in turn, provide more explicit information within the framework set by generic and programme descriptors. It is the responsibility of course teams to establish strategies for developing and communicating specific grade guidance and supporting their staff and students' engagement with, and understanding of, appropriate grade descriptors. The objective is to ensure comparability of approach and standards throughout our level 7 offer.

Guidance for students and staff

These grade descriptors are public. They are intended for students as well as staff, and are designed to enable students to understand the broad conceptions of learning within which Masters level assessment processes operate and to be relevant to the detailed tasks which students are required to undertake. They are intended to begin to answer the fundamental questions 'what must I do / what is expected of me to gain such a grade / award etc.' Programme, course or discipline specific grade descriptors will then provide additional information supplemented by material provided by the modules themselves. There are a number of aspects for staff to consider when customizing these descriptors for particular courses, programmes, disciplines or modules:

1. All pass descriptors are expressed in positive terms, about what the student has demonstrated to achieve the mark rather than in terms of what has not been done, and this should be reflected in course and discipline specific versions. For example the description for a pass should not be expressed in terms of what the work lacks compared to a merit.
2. It is important to 'translate' some of the generic phrases in these descriptions into programme, course or module context by using appropriate subject language and, if possible, offering concrete examples. For example, articulating what is meant by 'systematic understanding of knowledge', what might be acceptable evidence, data, material and resources in the discipline and how personal meaning and values articulate appropriately in the discipline.
3. In specific module terms, there will be a need to indicate the level of sophistication of data gathering, methodology, evaluation and communication that is appropriate for the academic level within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications [FHEQ] and the assessment task.
4. The structure of the grade descriptors purposely emphasizes process as well as outcome in the descriptions. This emphasis on process as well as outcome should be maintained in the customized programme or course-level descriptors in order to clearly convey the approaches to assessment and learning we are seeking to encourage and reward.

The structure of the grade descriptors

The grade descriptions below are set out according to the grade system used at the University of Worcester, and mapped on to the conventional categories or sub-divisions of the Masters degree in British Higher Education. These form a hierarchical system in which categories are, in some respects, linked to each other, each building on and developing from (and towards) attainments recognised in other categories. The categories are expressed as a series of discrete steps but, in practice, transitional attainment will often be evident in students' work. Work could, for example, demonstrate attributes of both the Pass and Merit categories at the same time, and the eventual decision as to where to place it would depend on the tutor's professional academic judgment and the application of the moderation process in line with the University's assessment policy. The complex nature of work at this high academic level cannot be reduced to a clear-cut series of mutually exclusive categories and grade descriptors cannot be interpreted as such. The category descriptions indicate the general characteristics of different types of work which lead to their assignment to particular categories.

Learning in Higher Education

Underpinning the various grade descriptions outlined below are a number of frameworks and theoretical models of learning in Higher Education. The criteria are informed by the FHEQ, which set out descriptions of the broad learning outcomes students need to demonstrate to achieve qualifications at the various academic levels and descriptions of what typical holders of higher education awards are able to do. The NICATS generic level descriptors provide further detail for all levels of study.

The theoretical frameworks add to these by helping to identify the progression, in terms of the student conception of learning in advanced higher education, we are seeking to encourage and reward through assessment. Broadly speaking this may be characterized as proceeding from a conception in which, at one extreme, learning is about acquiring, collating and reproducing value-free, factual information and expert opinion through to the other extreme where learning is a process of self-actualization, in which the student is establishing their own position and values in relation to a [super]complex world, taking active responsibility for their judgements and operating purposefully and autonomously. The opposite ends of this polarity represent a fundamental shift in the approach to and conception of learning: from a conception of learning as a relatively passive, receptive process in which the truth is 'out there' and must be acquired and recapitulated without significant adaptation by the student, to a conception in which learning is personal, the student actively seeks to abstract and create meaning, relates it to their own developing values, develops interpretation of the material and sets it in a broader context to challenge received opinion.

In more detail, students' approach to or conceptualisation of learning would be expected:

- at Pass grade to be systematically collecting a comprehensive range of expert opinion, prioritising the acquiring of specialised material, skills or procedures as needed, and ordering them into relevant categories. For these students evaluation is about being able to choose between many complex equally valid, or equally uncertain, alternative expert answers or proposed methodologies. Masters level is seen as a quantitative increase in knowledge.

Satisfactory practice would be expressed as recognizing and following the different but appropriate rules for different settings, being able to explain how the rules apply, practical understanding of current techniques, and accepting accountability in decision making in the light of these.

- at Merit grade to demonstrate active abstraction of meaning and synthesis of complex and specialized material in developing an interpretation of the task or evidence. For these students evaluation is about forming, building and substantiating a critical judgement - even in complex situations where the research evidence is partial – and critiquing the evidence base and methodologies used to create knowledge in the discipline. The conception of satisfactory practice at this grade is about being able to explain the evidence and value base for practice and why rules, protocols or practices are appropriate. Students take responsibility for their own learning, are proactive in their professional role, demonstrating self-direction and initiative.

- at Distinction grade to demonstrate the ability to develop appropriate creative, independent interpretations and/or evaluations of the task or evidence informed by command of their specialist area. Students are able to appreciate the relationships between knowledge or insights derived from a particular task and perspectives beyond the areas under immediate consideration. For these students evaluation is about the formulation of complex personally meaningful judgements based on the basis of current research and advanced scholarship, including the critiquing of established research methodologies and proposing of alternative hypotheses and approaches. Learning has relevance and meaning for the student beyond its own discrete sphere. The conception of effective practice will be evidence-informed but will embrace personal values and involve challenging established protocols and practices. It will demonstrate originality in addressing professional challenges.

The key defining characteristic of work at Masters level is that it is informed by issues and insight at the forefront of the discipline, field or area of professional practice. Whatever their approach to learning, students will be expected to demonstrate command of a complex and specialized area of knowledge, skills and practice, allowing them to conduct some research and to act autonomously and responsibly in their professional setting.

The Generic Grade Descriptors

Each grade category is prefaced by a general introductory statement, followed by a discussion of the *approaches* to assessment characteristic of work at each grade. Detailed criteria indicating the *outcomes* normally expected of work at that category follow.

Grade: Pass (50-59)

At Pass grade, students will be able to demonstrate comprehension of the task and a systematic ability to collate a comprehensive range of advanced knowledge and expert opinion. A broad range of sources relevant to the task will be analysed and evaluation of these undertaken within the realms of current received opinion.

Process: data and evidence are collected from the full range of relevant sources. Students report or recapitulate the material in a structured and relevant manner, with some partial evaluation of it. There is recognition of the complexity of academic debate and of the ways established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create knowledge in the discipline. Students will demonstrate the ability to outline a range of research methodologies and apply their choice of approach. Their understanding of practice is underpinned by an awareness of relevant codes, protocols and guidelines and how they are applied appropriately in the student's situation. The student's practice is informed by awareness of current problems and insights at the forefront of their field of study and they take responsibility for their decision making in the light of these. They can demonstrate specialised technical, professional and research skills.

Outcomes: the work demonstrates relevance to the task and provides a wide range of responses to it. The responses display command of a complex and specialist area of knowledge and skills and provide analysis and explanation of them. The descriptions will generally appear

sequential and free-standing rather than reflective and related but will, in themselves, provide a clear and coherent account. The sources will be referenced using the appropriate scholarly conventions. Some evaluation will be undertaken, possibly in terms of choosing between the range of expert opinion reported. The work demonstrates ability to communicate the material clearly through the appropriate format.

Grade: Merit (60-69)

At Merit grade, students will be able to develop and sustain a personal judgement within the limits of the task set. Their work will demonstrate comprehension of the task and synthesise, explain and critically evaluate both the evidence available and the methods by which this evidence was generated. An impressive range of sources relevant to the task will be used, drawing on the latest research and scholarship in the discipline, and these will be located within a critical interpretation of the task.

Process: data and evidence are collected from a wide range of relevant sources and are ordered in a clear and coherent presentation. Current research methodologies in the field are critiqued as appropriate and a reasoned case made for adopting particular methods in their own work. The focus of students' response to the task, in which students take an active role, is in the evaluation and interpretation of complex and sometimes incomplete data to present a meaningful response. Students join the academic debate and transformation of knowledge takes place. Student understanding of practice is informed by personal values of professionalism, ethical practice, inclusivity and ongoing personal development. Students can demonstrate initiative, personal responsibility and the ability to make and defend decisions in complex and unpredictable professional situations.

Outcomes: the work is relevant to the task, and provides a range of responses which display command of a complex and specialist area of knowledge and skills. The work demonstrates evidence of ability to synthesise evidence, to evaluate critically conflicting interpretations of it, to critique the means by which the evidence was produced and to reach an independent coherent resolution. The work is communicated clearly, effectively and persuasively, using a logical, progressive structure as appropriate to the intended audience.

Grade: Distinction (70-100)

Distinction grade work demonstrates students' ability to develop and sustain a personal judgement, which extends beyond the limits of the task set or concepts taught, and thus includes creative and original elements. This involves independent interpretation of the task, setting it in a broader value-based or theoretical context, and setting their judgements within a recognition of the limits of knowledge, even at the cutting edge of the discipline. Work is based in comprehension of the task, command of the complex and specialist knowledge and skills at the forefront of current understanding in the discipline, and in an ability to analyse, explain, evaluate and challenge the available evidence, the means by which it was produced, and the value and belief systems that shaped it.

Process: data and evidence are collected from the full range of relevant sources and are ordered clearly, coherently and systematically. Research methodologies are critiqued as appropriate, advanced approaches adopted and new hypotheses suggested. The focus of students' response to the task, in which students take an active role, is in the critical assessment and interpretation of data, research methods and the underpinning theoretical and cultural paradigm. Work is informed by independent personally meaningful judgement shaped by original thinking and a willingness to critique accepted beliefs and practices. Student understanding of professional practice demonstrates a clear commitment to personal values of

professionalism, ethical practice, inclusivity and ongoing personal development, together with a willingness to challenge established protocols and manage effective change.

Outcomes: the work takes a critical view of the task, and provides a wide range of responses to it which display command of complex and specialist areas of knowledge and skills. The work demonstrates ability to synthesise evidence, critique its means of production and evaluate conflicting interpretations of it to reach a novel, independent, personal resolution. Students successfully demonstrate relationships between knowledge or analysis derived from different contexts. The work demonstrates ability to communicate complex, challenging or novel ideas clearly, articulately and persuasively using a logical, progressive structure, as appropriate to the intended audience.

Failing work

Work which fails to attain a pass standard can fall into a variety of different categories. Such work normally demonstrates partial awareness and comprehension of the task, is largely descriptive, offers unsubstantiated opinion as evaluation, has some crucial factual inaccuracy and is dependent upon a restricted range of sources.

Fail: (40-49)

Student work will demonstrate comprehension of the task but will be dependent upon outdated opinion and sources. Some, sometimes unsubstantiated, evaluation will be offered in terms of proposing and supporting a simple 'single right answer'.

Process: data and/or evidence collection is characterised by the gathering of some relevant material. Students report or recapitulate material and expert opinion rather than transform it. There will be a tendency to reduce complex academic debate to simple 'black or white' options. Understanding of Masters level practice may be safe but is compliant without acceptance of responsibility.

Outcomes: work demonstrates basic relevance to the task, but provides a limited range of responses to it. It recognises and commands selected aspects of the curriculum requirements and seek to provide a factually accurate answer. Sources of data or evidence are referenced in a way which allows the reader to locate them. The work conveys much of the material clearly through appropriate formats.

Fail: (1-39)

Process: data and evidence collection is characterised by the gathering of little relevant material. Students attempt to report or recapitulate material rather than transforming it but are rarely successful in this.

Outcomes: the work demonstrates restricted relevance to the task, and provides few responses to it. It is descriptive, and rarely succeeds in recognising or commanding the curriculum requirements. The work is not clearly communicated through an appropriate format.

Fail: (0)

Process: there is no evidence of an attempt to tackle the task(s) set.

Outcomes: there is nothing of relevance in the work presented or submitted.

Further Reading:

- Barnett, Ronald (1999) *Realizing the University in an Age of Supercomplexity* (Maidenhead, SRHE / Open UP)
- Baxter Magolda, M. (1992) *Knowing and Reasoning in College (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass)*
- Biggs, John & Tang, C. (2007) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Maidenhead, SRHE / Open UP)
- QAA, The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
<http://qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI/default.asp> [accessed 14/1/08]
- The NICATS Generic Level Descriptors
http://www.nicats.ac.uk/about/prn_tlevl_descriptors.pdf [accessed 14/1/08]
- Perry, William G., Jr. (1970), *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).

Further guidance on assessment and the use of grade descriptors can be found on the ADPU web pages at: <http://www.worc.ac.uk/adpu/staffguides.htm>

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Revision History

Committee	Date	Change
LTSEC and ASQEC	June 2011	Document was updated as part of the normal three-year review cycle: a. Revised to stress the need to customise these at programme/course level and for course teams to develop a strategy for developing and communicating course/programme, module or assignment specific grade descriptors. b. Revised language to bring phrases like 'academic judgement' in line with the regulatory framework and to include reference to moderation and assessment policy. c. Added point 4 to guidance on customising at programme level – to require use of process as well as outcome elements.
ASQEC	June 2008	Version 1 approved