

GUIDANCE

Generic Masters Grade descriptors (effective from September 2016)

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Purpose

This document sets out the **generic grade descriptors** for **post graduate (level 7) assessments** in accordance with the Taught Courses Regulatory Framework. The generic grade descriptors provide a **benchmark for the setting of standards** in developing specific discipline related assessment criteria at course, module and individual assignment level.

Overview

These generic grade descriptors form the foundation of the assessment of all students undertaking level 7 programmes at the University of Worcester, including Integrated Masters, Postgraduate Certificates, Diplomas, and Masters programmes. 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 develop and communicate specific grade guidance and support 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.

Scope

All staff who teach and assess level 7 programmes, and students studying towards level 7 awards.

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 customising 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 grade awarded** 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 with 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 level 7** within the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications [FHEQ] and the assessment task.

4. **The structure of the grade descriptors purposely emphasises process as well as outcome in the descriptions.** This emphasis on process as well as outcome should be maintained in the customised 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**. These form a hierarchical system in which grades are, in some respects, linked to each other, each building on and developing from (and towards) attainments recognised at higher levels. 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 A and B grades 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.**

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 EWN generic credit 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 characterised 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-actualisation, 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 A grade to demonstrate the ability to develop appropriate creative, independent interpretations and/or evaluations of the task or evidence informed by command of a substantial and comprehensive knowledge and skills base in their specialist area.** Students are able to discriminate and justify key

issues and 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 current research and advanced scholarship, including the critiquing of established research methodologies and proposing of alternative and innovative hypotheses and approaches.

The conception of effective practice will be evidence-informed but will involve rigorous critical analysis of the interface between theory and practice, will embrace personal values and involve challenging established protocols and practices. It will demonstrate originality in addressing professional challenges, and excellent, creative use of multiple frameworks for evaluation and synthesis of compelling personal conclusions.

- **at B grade to demonstrate active abstraction of meaning and synthesis of complex and specialised material in developing an interpretation of the task or evidence independently.** 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. Masters level is seen as a process of discovery and development of quantitative and qualitative knowledge and skills, and the ability to use substantial multiple theoretical frameworks to reflect and critically analyse professional practice.

The conception of practice at this grade is about being able to critically evaluate with wide ranging synthesis and justify 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 C grade to demonstrate application of a substantial knowledge base and an ability to discern and discriminate given situations and contexts, through the deconstruction and formulation of core concepts and the application of critical thinking in order to explore some links to the wider context.** For these students, evaluation incorporates sound analysis and some initial synthesis of valid and relevant insights from a wide range of sources and methodologies. Masters level is seen as both a quantitative and qualitative development and application of knowledge and skills.

The conception of practice at this grade is about being able to apply a range of theoretical frameworks soundly and evaluate the relationship between theory and practice. Students have a good understanding of current techniques and demonstrate a good level of criticality and synthesis to show how theory informs their practice. They also take responsibility for their own learning, are pro-active professionally and accept accountability in decision-making.

- **at D grade to be systematically collecting a comprehensive range of expert opinion, prioritising the acquisition of specialised material, skills or procedures as needed, and ordering them into relevant categories and identify key issues.** 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 and skills, and the ability to reflect on professional practice making use of theoretical frameworks.

Satisfactory practice would be expressed as recognising 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.

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**, and the **ability to evaluate critically that developing knowledge base and the methodologies that underpin it**. Whatever their approach to learning, students will be expected to demonstrate **command of a complex and specialised**

area of knowledge, deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively as well as demonstrating **self-direction and originality in tackling problems**. Students will be able to **act autonomously and responsibly in skills and practice, allowing them to conduct research and to act effectively in complex and unpredictable settings associated with their professional context**.

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: A

Distinction grade work demonstrates students' ability to develop and sustain a personal argument to reach independent judgements, which extend beyond the limits of the task set or concepts taught, and thus includes clearly creative and original elements. This involves independent interpretation of the task, setting it in a broader value-based or theoretical context, high level skilled synthesis and critical evaluation of evidence, methodologies and multiple theoretical frameworks, with conclusions or solutions making some contribution to the knowledge base and understanding of the discipline. Work is based in excellent critical 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 to develop a personal line of argument. Research methodologies and theoretical frameworks are critiqued as appropriate and evaluated for usefulness in terms of the specific task, 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 paradigms. Work is informed by independent personally meaningful judgement shaped by original thinking and a willingness to critique accepted beliefs and practices, as well as the application of multiple theoretical perspectives and evaluation of evidence. Students can demonstrate initiative, personal responsibility and the ability to make and defend decisions in complex and unpredictable professional situations. In doing so they demonstrate a clear commitment to personal values of professionalism, ethical practice, inclusivity and ongoing personal development, together with a willingness to plan and manage effective change.

Outcomes: the work meets the learning outcomes for the task, demonstrating excellent insight and analysis of key issues and the impact of wider contexts. The work displays strong command of a broad range of complex and specialist areas of knowledge and skills, together with excellent critical analysis and evaluation of knowledge, methodologies and theoretical frameworks and their application. The work demonstrates a systematic and creative ability to synthesise evidence, critique its means of production and evaluate conflicting interpretations of it, drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks to reach a novel and well founded, independent, personal resolution. The work demonstrates high quality presentation and accuracy and the ability to communicate complex, challenging or novel ideas clearly, articulately and persuasively using a logical, progressive structure, as appropriate to the intended audience.

Work towards the top end of the grade band will demonstrate increasingly exceptional qualities in relation to the knowledge and skills base, levels of sound and insightful critical analysis and evaluation that results in a strong potential contribution to the knowledge base of the discipline. Such work is likely to be of near publishable standard in terms of the material and conclusions presented.

Grade: B

At B grade, students will be able to develop and sustain a personal judgement within the limits of the task set. Their work will demonstrate very good comprehension of the task and synthesise, explain and critically evaluate both the evidence available and the methods by which this evidence was generated, drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks. 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 comprehensively in a clear and highly 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, as well as the application of multiple theoretical perspectives and evaluation of evidence. Students can demonstrate initiative, personal responsibility and the ability to make and defend decisions in complex and unpredictable professional situations.

Outcomes: the work meets the learning outcomes for the task, demonstrating relevance, the identification and discrimination of key issues and their links to wider contexts. The work displays command of a complex and specialist area of substantial knowledge and skills. There is strong critical analysis and evaluation of knowledge, methodologies and theoretical frameworks and their application. The work demonstrates evidence of a very good 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 sources will be well referenced using the appropriate scholarly conventions with minimal errors of detail. The work is communicated clearly, effectively and persuasively, using a logical, progressive structure as appropriate to the intended audience.

Work towards the top end of the grade band will demonstrate increasingly greater levels of personal reflection and insight, together with very good synthesis of critical analysis and evaluation, to reach innovative and original conclusions. Work will be underpinned by the creative application of theory to practice and drawing on critical appreciation and use of substantial multiple theoretical frameworks. The quality of the work presented will have drawn on an extensive knowledge base that is at the forefront of the discipline, and output will be presented with confidence to show transparent lines of argument and compelling personal conclusions that indicate an excellent grasp of the issues under consideration.

Grade: C

At C grade, students will be able to articulate a personal judgement based on analysis of a wide knowledge base. Their work will demonstrate good comprehension of the task with evidence of synthesis and criticality, drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks. Students will be able to confidently express arguments through coherent and logical lines of enquiry. Conclusions will be firmly articulated, comprehensive and relevant, arising from premised arguments. Students are able to select substantial key primary and secondary literature sources demonstrating analysis and critical evaluation of a range of relevant issues.

Process: data and evidence are collected from a very good range of relevant sources, well-structured and coherent in presentation. A good standard of competence is evident in the appropriate application of methodologies. The focus of students' response to the task, in which they take an active role, is in the comprehension and good evaluation of data to present a meaningful response. Student understanding of practice is informed by standard values of professionalism, ethics, inclusivity and ongoing personal development, as well as the application of theoretical perspectives and evaluation of

evidence. There is engagement with academic debate and application of established techniques of research and enquiry to create further knowledge in the discipline.

Outcomes: the work meets the learning outcomes for the task, demonstrating developing critical and comprehensive understanding of the specialist area of knowledge and skills. There is good critical analysis and evaluation of knowledge, methodologies and theoretical frameworks and their application. The work demonstrates good levels of reflection and the foundations of synthesis together with the development of a logical or insightful argument or evaluation of evidence. The sources will be accurately referenced using the appropriate scholarly conventions and supporting material will be well presented. The work demonstrates an ability to communicate clearly and concisely through an organised and coherent structure, as appropriate to the intended audience.

The work at the top end of the grade band will demonstrate increasingly greater levels of personal reflection and insight, together with strong synthesis of critical analysis and evaluation, to reach well thought through articulated conclusions. Work will be underpinned by the strong application and integration of theory and practice drawing upon a range of theoretical frameworks. The quality of the work presented will be referenced to a significant knowledge base to reflect current discipline based developments and be presented coherently, with careful consideration for detail. A good level of confidence will be evident in the lines of argument presented with some assertion of personal constructs indicating very good comprehension of the issues being considered.

Grade: D

At D 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 a good 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 a critical understanding of a range of research methodologies and theoretical frameworks and apply their choice of approach with some evaluation. 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 meets the learning outcomes for the task, demonstrating relevance, identification of key issues and command of a complex and specialist area of knowledge and skills. There is sound critical analysis and evaluation related to a range of expert opinion. The analysis will generally appear sequential and free-standing rather than reflective and related but provide a clear and coherent account to reach firm and clearly articulated conclusions. The sources will be generally accurately referenced using the appropriate scholarly conventions. The work demonstrates an ability to communicate the material clearly and logically through the appropriate format.

Work towards the top end of the grade band will demonstrate increasingly greater levels of personal reflection, critical analysis and evaluation, underpinned by insight into the relationship between theory and practice and drawing on different theoretical frameworks. The quality of the work presented will have drawn on a substantial knowledge base and be presented with confidence and good attention to detail, indicating a strong grasp of the issues under consideration.

Failing work

Work that 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: E

Student work will demonstrate comprehension of the task but will be dependent upon out-dated 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 seeks 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: F

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: G

Process: there is marginal engagement with the gathering of data and other material but little understanding of the topic.

Outcome: the work demonstrates very little relevance to the task.

Fail: H

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

Biggs, John & Tang, C. (2007) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Maidenhead, SRHE/Open UP)

Dahlgren, L.O., Fejes, A., Abrandt-Dahlgren, M., & Trowald, N., (2009) Grading systems, features of assessment and students approaches to learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(2), 185 -194

Joughin, G., (2009) *Assessment, learning and judgement in higher education*. Sydney, Springer

Yorke, M., (2008) *Grading student achievement in higher education*. Signals and shortcomings. Abingdon: Routledge

Yorke, M., (2010) How finely grained does summative assessment need to be? *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(6), 677 – 689

QAA, The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=2718#.Vwz0DqFwbct> [accessed 08/07/2016]

EWNI generic credit level descriptors - Higher education credit framework for England

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Academic-Credit-Framework.pdf> [accessed 08/07/2016]

Further guidance on assessment and the use of grade descriptors can be found on the EDU web pages at: <http://www.worc.ac.uk/edu/staffguides.htm> [accessed 08/07/2016]

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Related Policies, Procedures, Guidance, Forms or Templates	Grade Descriptors Levels 4-6 (UG) Grade Descriptors - Level 8 (PGR)
Guidance superseded by this version	Generic Masters Grade Descriptors v2,dated June 2011