

# Towards shared descriptors for Bachelors and Masters

A report from a Joint Quality Initiative informal group (contributors to the discussions and drafting of the BaMa descriptors include those listed in Annex A)

## I. Background

1. The Bologna declaration / process proposes the introduction, within a European higher education space, of a system of qualifications in higher (tertiary) education that is based on two cycles. The first (undergraduate) cycle culminates in the award of Bachelor's degrees. The second cycle of study seeks to build on those attributes gained during the first cycle, leading to (postgraduate) qualifications that include Master's degrees and doctorates. The Bologna process also seeks to encourage a nomenclature of awards that is comparable between countries and is easily readable, thus enhancing understanding of HE qualifications and encouraging mobility of those studying within the European higher education space.

2. One aspect of the work under the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) has been to consider the development of descriptors for Bachelor's and Master's (BaMa descriptors) that might be shared within Europe and be available for a variety of purposes depending on particular national, regional or institutional contexts and requirements. A group with members from several national or region QA organisations (see Annex A) has discussed the diverse requirements for, and characteristics of, such BaMa descriptors, and have developed descriptors that may now be tested and shared.

3. Several national and regional projects have sought, or are currently working, to identify the characteristics associated with particular HE qualifications, and develop taxonomies and frameworks that clarify the relationships between qualifications. The work of the JQI group has included detailed consideration of such projects and has additionally drawn on the outcomes of discussions in Helsinki on common characteristics of Bachelor's. The Helsinki discussions characterised Bachelor's by the extent of study (years or ECTS); the work of the JQI group has been concerned with identifying the academic and other requirements that, as the outcomes of study, characterise and distinguish between Bachelor's and Master's.

4. A survey was carried out amongst participants in the JQI project in preparation for the discussions on the possible form, content and application of BaMa descriptors. Responses indicated a variety of needs and potential uses for such descriptors, and also the importance of having a shared understanding of the terms used both within the descriptors and to describe the context(s) in which they may be applied.

5. All participants agreed that each descriptor should indicate an overarching summary of the outcomes of a whole programme of study. The descriptor should be concerned with the totality of the study, and a student's abilities and attributes that have resulted in the award of the qualification. The descriptor should not be limited to describing merely the outcomes of units of assessment at the level of the qualification. The group has thus sought to develop a shared *qualification descriptor*, not a shared *level descriptor*. It was however noted that within some national, regional and institutional contexts there might also be a requirement for the local development of level descriptors.

6. The JQI group discussed the merits of seeking a single shared descriptor for Bachelor's and similarly one for Master's, as opposed to seeking a process to demonstrate 'compatibility' between descriptors developed for national, regional or institutional purposes and that that reflect the detail of local contexts. In line with the essence of Bologna the group concluded that it should seek a single generic descriptor for *all* Bachelor's degrees, and similarly a single generic descriptor for *all* Master's degrees. The group recognises that the development of these descriptors should not hinder any national, regional or local requirements for additional descriptors.

7. There are a wide variety of programmes leading to Bachelor's awards, differing in content, delivery and process, and nomenclature; for example, a number of countries discriminate between Professional Bachelor's and Academic Bachelor's awards. Similarly, there are a wide variety of programmes leading to different types of Master's degree. It was agreed that the value of the generic descriptors would be enhanced substantially if they could be cross-referenced to more detailed programme profiles or specifications.

8. A programme profile / specification would identify the particular components of the programme leading to the qualification; for example it might include prerequisites for entry to the programme, details of the components, their delivery and assessment, and any requirements relating to regulated professions. The form and components within the profile would reflect national, regional or institutional contexts and be related to the needs and responsibilities of those awarding or accrediting the particular programme.

9. The JQI group considered that, in keeping with the Bologna process, the shared descriptors should be formulated in a language and style that is 'readable' by all who would have an interest in them, in particular students, their sponsors, employers, HE academics and their managers, and the general public. The following represents proposals towards generic descriptors that may be useful as indicators or reference points to the abilities and qualities of holders of Bachelor's and Master's degrees awarded within the European higher education space.

## II. Shared descriptors for Bachelor's and Master's

10. Bachelor's degrees are awarded to students who:

have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon and supersedes 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;

can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional<sup>1</sup> approach to their work or vocation, and have competences<sup>2</sup> 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.

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1 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.

2 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.

11. Master's degrees<sup>3</sup> are awarded to students who:

have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with Bachelor's level, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research<sup>4</sup> context; 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.

### III Testing the shared descriptors

12. Members of the group have initiated discussions about options for testing the BaMa descriptors in joint 'pilot studies' that involve different approaches to QA. Such studies will seek to investigate the utility of the descriptors, and in particular their form, components and levels of expectations. In addition to contributing to transparency concerning the nature of Bachelors and Masters qualifications, it is anticipated that such trans-national investigations will also contribute to enhancing the understanding and recognition of the various purposes and characteristics of different evaluation systems.

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- 3 Some JQI representative suggested that MBA programmes should be specifically excluded; others consider that MBA programmes should reflect the attributes contained within the shared Masters descriptor.
  - 4 '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.
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#### Annex A Those who have contributed to the discussions and drafting of the shared BaMa descriptors include:

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#### The differences are:

##### **knowledge and understanding**

- .. *from* .. advanced textbook level + .. *to* .. extended / enhanced knowledge and understanding that provide a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas .. often in a research context ... ;

##### **•applying knowledge and understanding**

- .. *from* .. devising and sustaining arguments .. *to* .. problem-solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts .. ;

##### **•making judgements**

- .. *from*.. gathering and interpreting relevant data .. *to*.. having the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete data .. ;

**communication**

- .. *from* .. can communicate information, ideas problems and solutions .. *to* .. can communicate their conclusions and the underpinning knowledge and rationale under;

**learning skills**

- .. *from* .. have developed those skills needed to study further with a high level of autonomy .. *to* .. studying in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.