

## Draft Policy Statement – Credit Value and Characteristics of a NQF Masters Degree

### Background

Participants at the NQF Review Conference requested that the minimum size for a NQF Masters Degree as shown in Annexure C of the NQF Regulations be re-considered. It was stated that the minimum of 240 Credits was more than international norms and thus made the Namibian Masters degrees non-competitive in the market place.

The requirements and/or characteristics of Masters degrees across the international field was also looked at to monitor the alignment of Namibian requirements with international benchmarks.

### Results

A revised policy statement has been formulated as text that will replace that shown in Annexure C of the NQF Regulations. The headings as currently used in Annexure C have been retained where relevant. **The information shown in the policy statement would become operational on a date to be set by the NQA Council.**

For ease of reading, new text has been italicised. The italics will not appear in any amended version of Annexure C.

The revised policy statement:

- a) confirms the Masters Degree as being a NQF Level 9 qualification
- b) amends the recommended minimum total of credits and the minimum structure of the qualification type to accord with international benchmarks
- c) confirms the general characteristics of the Masters degree on the Namibian NQF, with some minor additions to text
- d) proposes some additional information relating to entry requirements
- e) proposes some additional information on what constitutes research.

## Policy statement: NQF Masters Degrees

### Characteristics and purpose

Degrees at a Masterate level are normally designed to build on the principal subject(s) of a qualifying degree or *diploma* qualification that itself contains a significant research component or preparation *in research-related techniques applicable to the principal subject(s) or professional field* at an advanced level of the National Qualifications Framework, *likely at NQF Level 8 or, in some, justified circumstances, at NQF Level 7.*

Alternatively, a Masters degree may build on relevant knowledge and skills derived from occupational experience *where the nature of such derived knowledge and skills-related abilities align well with the generic, broad outcome statements in the Descriptor for NQF Level 8 or, in some, justified circumstances, at NQF Level 7.*

*Masters degrees can be designed to reflect a number of orientations, each of which will likely contribute significantly to the contents and structure of the qualification. Principally, these orientations will reflect:*

- *an advancement of academic abilities, usually intended to prepare researchers who can contribute, through their scholarship to the advancement of knowledge in or across a subject and/or*
- *preparation for contributions towards the development of knowledge or techniques at an advanced level or extension of practice-related expertise in a recognised profession. Such degrees are often developed in association with a professional body and can often fulfil all or part of the requirements for professional registration or recognition and/or*
- *enhancement of specialised knowledge and expertise in order to take up specialist, senior and/or advanced placements in a career structure.*

*The content and pedagogical approach for each Masters degree must have a close alignment with the broad outcome statements provided in the Descriptor for NQF Level 9. Masters degrees would typically require people to:*

- *demonstrate mastery of theoretically sophisticated subject matter in one or more disciplines or area of professional practice*
- *evaluate critically the findings and discussions in relevant literature*
- *ethically apply relevant and applicable research principles and methods*
- *analyse and argue from evidence*
- *apply knowledge and skills to new or abstract situations*
- *engage in rigorous intellectual analysis, criticism and problem solving*

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- *communicate and justify their findings with clarity to specialist and non-specialist audiences*
- *act and/or apply knowledge and skills with a high degree of self-direction and autonomy.*

*Masters degrees may be designed to enable delivery programmes that utilise varied methodologies and weightings of these. The nature of the programme adopted must be commensurate with the purpose of the degree.*

Masters degrees must contain a significant element of supervised *and peer reviewed research or professional activity that is original and/or innovative within the relevant academic, professional and technological field, performing and creative art.* The results of this research or *professional activity* would normally be embodied in *textual outputs (such as thesis, dissertation, substantial research paper or series of papers) and/or non-textual outputs (such as, products, images, or performances).*

The *peer reviewed research or professional activity* must represent a minimum of 25% of the credits required for the award of the qualification. *All of the research or professional activity* component must be *commensurate with* the level of certification.

A lower qualification may not be awarded for early exit from a Masters degree programme except where exit represents *the* attainment of another *registered* qualification.

**Level of certification**

Masters degrees shall be awarded at NQF Level 9.

**Size of qualification**

A minimum of 180 NQF Credits all of which must be at or above Level 9.

## **International Practice – Credit Values**

### **1. Volume of Learning**

- 1.1. Masters degrees are generally characterized by specified features related to the complexity of knowledge and skill development and generation rather than the volume of learning required. However, Credit values are useful, however, in providing an indication of the breadth of learning required and information about relationships between pathways into and from the qualification.
- 1.2. Examples of international practice regarding the size and composition of Masters degrees follow.

#### **United Kingdom**

- 1.3. There are some variations in the *suggested* sizes of Masters degrees in the United Kingdom. For example:

##### ***England***

The typical minimum credit value is 180 (where 1 Credit broadly equates to 10 hours<sup>1</sup>) of which at least 150 will be at Masters level.

In “Integrated Masters” (where the qualification subsumes an Honours degree, for example), the typical credit allocation will be 480 (generally there is a three year qualifying degree subsumed, which could be awarded with Honours) of which at least 120 are at Masters level.

No credit values are normally assigned to “Research Masters” where the degree is substantially assessed through a thesis.

“Taught Masters” (where structured learning predominates) would normally have 360 Credits of which 240 will be at Masters level.

##### ***Wales***

Typical minimum is 180 Credits of which at least 150 will be at Masters level.

Integrated Masters are usually of 480 Credits with at least 120 at Masters level.

##### ***Scotland***

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<sup>1</sup>The UK frameworks are not directly related to a credit transfer system.

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Typical minimum credits is 180 of which a minimum of 150 is at Masters level.

Integrated Masters are generally 600 Credits (subsuming a 480 Credit Honours degree) of which at least 120 should be at Masters level.

### Europe

- 1.4. The Bologna-Bergen agreement of 2005 set up a Framework for Qualifications for the European higher education sector. Masters degrees are defined as *second cycle* degrees following on from bachelor degrees. A typical Masters degree would have between 90 and 120 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits where 1 ECTS credit is equal to 2 Credits in the UK system<sup>2</sup>, with a minimum of 60 credits at the second cycle level.

### South Africa

- 1.5. There are two main variants for a general Master's degree in the new Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework in South Africa – a degree awarded on the basis of a single, advanced research project<sup>3</sup> or a degree awarded upon a mix of coursework (perhaps inclusive of demonstrations of professional practice) and a 'mini' dissertation. Regardless, the minimum number of credits required is 180 of which a minimum of 120 must be at NQF Level 9 (the exit level for this type of a degree). In the case of a mixed Master's, the dissertation must represent a minimum of 60 credits aligned with abilities described for Level 9.
- 1.6. The new Sub-Framework also makes provision for a Master's degree (Professional) intended to educate and train graduates who can contribute to the development of knowledge at an advanced level and be equipped for advanced and specialised professional employment. Such degrees are often developed in association with a professional body and can often fulfil all or part of the requirements for professional registration or recognition. The minimum number of credits is 180 of which a minimum of 120 must be at Level 9 – the exit Level for this type of qualification.
- 1.7. The Master's degree (Professional) must be inclusive of an independent study component that makes up at least a quarter of the total Level 9 credits. This study could be in the form of a single research or technical project or be a series of smaller projects demonstrating innovation or professional expertise.

### Australia

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<sup>2</sup>A typical, second cycle Masters would be between 180 and 240 Credits in the UK systems.

<sup>3</sup>The research component or components of a general Master's Degree is required to be commensurate with the characteristics of the relevant discipline and field as well as the purpose of the programme. In addition to a dissertation or treatise may take the form of a technical report, one or more creative performances or works, or a series of peer-reviewed articles or other research-equivalent outputs.

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### 1.8. Three types of Masters degrees may be registered at Level 9 of the ten-level Australian Qualifications Framework:

- a Masters degree (Research) which is aimed at qualifying people who will apply an advanced body of knowledge in a range of contexts for research and scholarship. The volume of learning is typically 1 to 2 years of full time study<sup>4</sup>. If the degree is in the same discipline, 1.5 years would be normal if the qualifying qualification was registered at Level 7 (Bachelors) or if the qualifying qualification was registered at Level 8 (Honours). If the degree is in a different discipline, the minimum size would be 2 years with a Level 7 entry or 1.5 years if a Level 8 entry.

At least two thirds of the volume of learning will be devoted to research<sup>5</sup>, research training and independent study.

- a Masters degree (Coursework) which is aimed at qualifying people who will apply an advanced body of knowledge in a range of contexts for professional practice or scholarship. The volume of learning is typically the same as above. Some of the learning will include *some* research, project work, or practice-related learning. If the degree has a professional orientation, a significant component of the structured learning must be developed in collaboration with the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.
- a Masters degree (Extended) which is aimed at qualifying people who will apply an advanced body of knowledge in a range of contexts for professional practice. The volume of learning is typically 3 – 4 years following the completion of a minimum of a three year Level 7 qualification. The programme must include *some* independent research and a significant component of practice-related learning. This must be developed in collaboration with the relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body.

## New Zealand

### 1.9. The latest version of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework states that a Master's Degree will be at least 240 credits *except* where:

- it builds on a Bachelor's Degree with Honours (Level 8<sup>6</sup>) or an equivalent qualification (Postgraduate Diploma), or significant relevant professional

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<sup>4</sup>A year of full time study is accepted in the Namibia NQF as being about 1200 hours of learning – 120 NQF Credits. In South Africa, a full time year at Masters and Doctoral levels is taken to be about 1800 hours of learning, or 180 NQF Credits.

<sup>5</sup>Research comprises systematic experimental and theoretical work, application and/or development that results in an increase in the dimensions of knowledge.

experience, in which case it can be fewer than 240 but no fewer than 120 credits

- it builds on a Bachelor's Degree (Level 7) or an equivalent qualification plus relevant professional practice, in which case it can be fewer than 240 but no fewer than 180 credits.

The degree must comprise a minimum of 40 credits at Level 9 with the remainder at Level 8.

1.10. The structure of a Master's degree will follow three general forms:

- Master's Degree by thesis, normally based on a Level 8 qualification in the same field of study, must contain at least 90 credits at Level 9 as a research project, consisting of a thesis, dissertation, substantial research paper or scholarly creative work
- Master's degree by course work and thesis, normally based on an undergraduate degree in the same field of study, must contain at least 90 credits at Level 9 in the form of a thesis, dissertation, substantial research paper or scholarly creative work, and of which 150 credits are from course work
- Master's Degree by course work is normally based on an undergraduate degree achieved at a specified level of attainment. The degree is at least 120 to 240 credits and is achieved through coursework consisting of courses, project work and research in varying combinations. It may build on undergraduate study in the same academic field, or it may build on the more generic graduate attributes of an undergraduate degree in other fields, or in some cases on relevant professional experience. Master's Degrees that build on generic attributes and/or experience (often called 'conversion Master's') are usually in professional fields and are recognised as appropriate professional preparation by the profession or industry concerned

## **2. International Practices - Characteristics of a Masters degree**

### **United Kingdom**

2.1. There are two qualification systems in operation across the higher education sectors in the United Kingdom – that of Scotland and that of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. There is, however, a high degree of comparability in the two systems which allows for mobility of graduates and ease of recognition by employers and institutions.

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<sup>6</sup>There are ten NQF Levels, highly comparable in nature to those of Namibia and South Africa. The NZQF Credits carry the same value as NQF Credits in Namibia.

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2.2. Given the independence and autonomy of the institutions of higher learning there is no nationally agreed definition for qualification types and awards. However, there is acceptance that qualifications carrying the term 'Masters' in its title will meet the generic outcome statements in the qualification descriptor used in the relevant qualification system. That is, graduates should have demonstrated:

- a systematic understanding of knowledge, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of the discipline, field of study or area of professional practice
- originality in their application of this knowledge and in addressing problems
- a comprehensive understanding of the techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship
- skills needed to exercise independent learning and to develop new skills to a high level.

2.3. There are a number of purposes identified as being the basis upon which a Masters can be awarded. For example:

- to enable a focus to be placed on a particular aspect of a broader subject area that has been the area of prior learning and study
- to enable a focus to be placed on a particular subject area or field of study in a greater depth than previously encountered in study or experience
- to enable the acquisition of advanced research abilities applicable to a discipline or field of study
- to enable the undertaking of a research project in an area of interest (where the research is the majority of the assessment towards the conferring of the degree)
- to enable specialisation or greater specialisation in an area of employment or professional practice.

2.4. Delivery of a programme learning towards a Masters degree can also be quite varied. They can be:

- full or part time
- face-to-face or distance or mixed
- standalone or integrated with other, lower or higher qualification types at degree-level
- partly or fully within an employment setting.

The structure and mode of delivery must, however, be appropriate to the purpose of the degree and content focus. The structure and mode must be made transparent to the learners.

### **European 2<sup>nd</sup> Cycle qualifications**



2.5. Second cycle (or Masters degree) qualifications are awarded to graduates that have, generally, demonstrated:

- knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with a first cycle qualification and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research<sup>7</sup> context.
- application of knowledge and understanding and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader or multi-disciplinary contexts related to their field of study
- ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, and that reflects on social and ethical responsibilities linked with the application of their knowledge and judgements
- ability to communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale for these, to specialist and non-specialists audiences with clarity and non-ambiguity
- skills in learning that allows largely self-directed and autonomous further studies.

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<sup>7</sup>Research is used to cover a wide range of activities – generally as a careful study or investigation based upon a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. The term accommodates a range of activities that support original and innovative work in academic, professional and technological fields, performing and creative arts. It is not limited to ‘scientific method’.

## **South Africa**

2.6. Graduates from general Master's degrees must be able to:

- reflect critically on theory and its application within the field of study or the discipline
- deal with complex issues
- design and critically appraise research using systematic and creative approaches
- make sound judgements using data and information at their disposal
- communicate conclusions clearly to specialised and non-specialised audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems
- act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks with a theoretical underpinning
- continue to advance their knowledge, understanding and skills.

2.7. Entry into a general master's degree is by way of a relevant Bachelor Honours degree or a relevant Postgraduate Diploma. A relevant Bachelor degree registered at Level 8 may also be accepted as a minimum entry.

2.8. Master's Degrees (Professional) require graduates that are able to:

- deal with complex issues
- design and critically appraise analytical writing using systematic and creative approaches
- make sound judgements using data and information at their disposal
- communicate conclusions clearly to specialised and non-specialised audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems
- act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks with a professional orientation
- continue to advance their knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to a particular profession.

2.9. The minimum admission requirement to a Master's Degree (Professional) is a relevant Bachelor Honours degree or Postgraduate Diploma (both at Level 8). A cognate (professional) Bachelors degree at Level 8 may also be accepted to a Master's degree programme in the same cognate area.

## **Australia**

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2.10. All Masters degrees are registered at Level 9 of the AQF. This level is characterized by the following, broad abilities:

- advanced and integrated understanding of a complex body of knowledge in one or more disciplines or areas of practice
- expert, specialised cognitive and technical skills in a body of knowledge or practice to independently:
  - analyse critically, reflect on and synthesize complex information, problems, concepts and theories
  - research and apply established theories to a body of knowledge or practice
  - interpret and transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- application of knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, expert judgement, adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner or learner.

2.11. Graduates with a Masters Degree (Research) are expected to have:

- a body of knowledge that includes the understanding of recent developments in one or more disciplines
- advanced knowledge of research principles and methods applicable to the field of work or learning
- cognitive skills to demonstrate mastery of theoretical knowledge and to reflect critically on theory and its application
- cognitive, technical and creative skills to investigate, analyse and synthesise complex information, problems, concepts and theories and to apply established theories to different bodies of knowledge or practice
- cognitive, technical and creative skills to generate and evaluate complex ideas and concepts at an abstract level
- cognitive and technical skills to design, use and evaluate research and research methods
- communication and technical skills to present a coherent and sustained argument and to disseminate research results to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- technical and communication skills to design, evaluate, implement, analyse, theorise and disseminate research that makes a contribution to knowledge.

2.12. Graduates with a Masters Degree (Coursework) are expected to have:

- a body of knowledge that includes the understanding of recent developments in a discipline and/or area of professional practice
- knowledge of research principles and methods applicable to a field of work and/or learning
- cognitive skills to demonstrate mastery of theoretical knowledge and to reflect critically on theory and professional practice or scholarship
- cognitive, technical and creative skills to investigate, analyse and synthesise complex information, problems, concepts and theories and to apply established theories to different bodies of knowledge or practice
- cognitive, technical and creative skills to generate and evaluate complex ideas and concepts at an abstract level
- communication and technical research skills to justify and interpret theoretical propositions, methodologies, conclusions and professional decisions to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- technical and communication skills to design, evaluate, implement, analyse and theorise about developments that contribute to professional practice or scholarship.

2.13. Graduates with a Masters Degree (Extended) are expected to have:

- a body of knowledge that includes the extended understanding of recent developments in a discipline and its professional practice
- knowledge of research principles and methods applicable to the discipline and its professional practice
- cognitive skills to demonstrate mastery of theoretical knowledge and to reflect critically on theory and professional practice
- cognitive, technical and creative skills to investigate, analyse and synthesise complex information, problems, concepts and theories and to apply established theories to different bodies of knowledge or practice
- cognitive, technical and creative skills to generate and evaluate complex ideas and concepts at an abstract level
- communication and technical research skills to justify and interpret theoretical propositions, methodologies, conclusions and professional decisions to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- technical and communication skills to design, evaluate, implement, analyse and theorise about developments that contribute to professional practice.

**New Zealand**

2.14. Holders of a Master's Degree are able to:

- show evidence of advanced knowledge about a specialist field of enquiry or professional practice
- demonstrate mastery of sophisticated theoretical subject matter
- evaluate critically the findings and discussions in the literature
- research, analyse and argue from evidence
- work independently and apply knowledge to new situations
- engage in rigorous intellectual analysis, criticism and problem-solving.

If a Master's Degree includes a component of supervised research of not fewer than 90 credits at level 9, the graduate is also able to:

- demonstrate a high order of skill in the planning, execution and completion of a piece of original research or creative scholarly work
- apply such skills learned during the study programme to new situations.

The research should be completed to internationally recognised standards and demonstrate that the graduate has a capacity for independent thinking.

## Draft only

## References

Australian Qualifications Framework Council, *Australian Qualifications Framework*, Second Edition, January 2013 (available on [www.aqf.edu.au](http://www.aqf.edu.au))

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