

University of Birmingham

**The Provision of Awards leading to the Degree of Master of Philosophy**

**Topic and Purpose of this Paper**

1. For APRC to **receive** a paper regarding the comments made by external examiners in respect of the University's MPhil programmes and to **consider** the most appropriate way to address these comments.

**Proposal**

2. APRC is requested to consider establishing a working group, with representation from all of the Colleges, and from Academic Services and the Birmingham Guild of Students, in order to carry out a consultative review across the University on the provision of postgraduate research at master's degree level. In carrying out such a review, this working group will then provide specific recommendations to APRC in terms of the amendments that may be necessary, not just to Regulations and descriptors, but to other legislation including Ordinances and Codes of Practice.

**Background and Context**

3. At its meeting on 20 May 2009, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee received a paper (QAE.09.05.06) on external examiner reports for postgraduate research degrees. This paper raised the following two points:

Having regard to one and two year MPhil provision, this paper noted that three examiners had expressed major concern about MPhil degrees because, under University of Birmingham Regulations, the same degree can be awarded following completion of either a one year programme, worth a notional 180 credits, or a two year programme, worth a notional 360 credits. Also, a different standard of work is required dependent on the duration of the programme. For example, a student registered on a one year MPhil programme must produce "a thesis containing research work of merit" whereas a student on a two year MPhil programme must produce "a thesis containing original work of merit, worthy of publication".

A fairly small number of examiners raised the issue of the one year/two year MPhil programmes, but they expressed quite serious concerns about this aspect of the Regulations. At the University of Birmingham, the difference between one year and two year MPhil programmes can also be subject-related. For example, MPhil programmes in Education last for one year, whereas MPhil programmes in Economics last for two years. The difference in the notional number of credits and in the required standard of work is a clear discrepancy, particularly as there appears (from an external perspective) to be no difference in the degree being awarded to students on

either of these programmes. QAEC recommended that these issues were also worth investigating in relation to the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, the QAA Higher Education Credit Framework, and in relation to the practice at other institutions.

U-QAEC resolved that APRC should be invited to:

- Review the Regulations for one-year and two-year MPhil degrees, in light of comments from PGR External Examiners.
- Consider whether any changes should be made to the descriptor for the MPhil (Mode B) in the Regulations.

#### 4. University of Birmingham Regulations

The relevant Regulations of the University are reproduced as Appendix 1. However, for ease of comparison, the University's current postgraduate provision at master's degree level may be summarised as follows:

##### MPhil (Mode A)

- This is normally a 1 year full-time programme (2 years full-time maximum).
- The programme is comprised of a notional 180 credits (of which no more than the equivalent of 10 to 30 credits will be of training).
- The key activity is to undertake research (combined with appropriate training) and to produce a thesis of 40,000 words (CAL, CSS) or 30,000 words (EPS, LES, MDS).

##### MPhil (Mode B)

- This is normally a 1 year full-time programme (2 years full-time maximum).
- The programme is comprised of a notional 180 credits (between 30 and 70 credits will be taught modules).
- The programme provides training in research, with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills, and the production of a thesis or research report of 20,000 words (CAL, CSS) or 15,000 words (EPS, LES, MDS).

##### MPhil (2 Year) [Also MLitt]

- This is normally a 2 year full-time programme (3 years full-time maximum).
- The programme is comprised of a notional 360 credits (between 20 and 50 credits will be taught modules, taken over the two years).
- The programme is concerned with undertaking research, combined with appropriate training, and the production of a thesis containing original work worthy of production of 60,000 words (CAL, CSS) or 40,000 words (EPS, LES, MDS).

##### MRes

- This is normally a 1 year full-time programme (2 years full-time maximum).
- This programme is comprised of a notional 180 credits (with between 30 and 70 credits being from taught modules)
- The programme is concerned with the acquisition of research skills, with the production of a thesis or research report of 20,000 words (CAL, CSS) or 15,000 words (EPS, LES, MDS).

5. Arrangements in Russell Group and other Comparable Institutions

A survey of the websites of a number of Russell Group and comparator universities has revealed that whilst there is some variability in MPhil provision, with some institutions (namely Cambridge, Glasgow and Edinburgh providing taught MPhil programmes similar to the Birmingham MPhil Modes A and B routes), in the majority of institutions master's level research is undertaken via completion of the following degrees:

- A Masters by Research (MA/MSc/MRes/LLM) of one year's duration full-time, where the student is required to produce a dissertation of between 15,000 and 30,000 words (usually accounting for 60 of the notional 180 credits required to complete the programme).
- A Masters (MPhil/MLitt) of two year's duration full-time, where the student is required to produce a dissertation of between 50,000 and 60,000 words.

This is shown via the table provided in Appendix 2.

6. The Higher Education Credit Framework for England: Guidance on Academic Credit Arrangements in Higher Education in England, August 2008

This document indicates the alignment of master's level qualifications (FHEQ Level 7) with the second cycle of the FQ-EHEA (end of cycle qualifications). This information has been extracted and presented in the first column of the following table, with the second column mapping to the existing University of Birmingham equivalent qualification.

| <b>HECF Guidance category</b>   | <b>University of Birmingham equivalent</b>         |
|---|--|
| Research master's degrees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not typically credit-rated</li> <li>• E.g. MPhil or MLitt</li> </ul>   | MPhil/MLitt (2 year)                               |
| Taught MPhil <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum of 360 credits</li> <li>• Minimum of 240 credits at the level of the qualification</li> </ul>   | No University of Birmingham equivalent             |
| Taught master's degrees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum of 180 credits</li> <li>• Minimum of 150 credits at the level of the qualification</li> <li>• E.g. MA/MSc/MRes</li> </ul>          | MA/MSc/LLM<br>MPhil Mode A<br>MPhil Mode B<br>MRes |
| Integrated master's degrees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimum of 480 credits</li> <li>• Minimum of 120 credits at the level of the qualification</li> <li>• E.g. MChem/MEng/MPhys</li> </ul> | MSci   |

7. The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, August 2008.

Appendix 3 provides the descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 7: master's degree, as is set out in the FHEQ document.

Other relevant paragraphs from this document include the following:

*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).*

*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.*

8. Master's Degree Characteristics – QAA Draft for Consultation, September 2009

The QAA has recently circulated for consultation the above document that is concerned with master's degree characteristics. Whilst recognising the diversity of provision that currently exists, the QAA has sought to develop a reference point to provide practical assistance to providers and other interested parties, and which can be consulted when designing, delivering and reviewing new and existing programmes. The QAA's approach within this document is, however, suggestive of the benefits of being consistent with the provisions of both the Higher Education Credit Framework and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, as outlined above. Further information on this consultation, responses to which are requested by 27 November 2009, may be downloaded via the following link:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/masters](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/masters)

### **Arguments in Support of the Proposal**

9. The research undertaken to produce this paper has demonstrated that, whilst there is some small measure of variance in the provision of master's level postgraduate research in comparable institutions, in most cases such research is undertaken via two routes. Either, via:
- An MRes (or similar) route, in which a student completes a 180 credit programme (over one year full-time or two years part-time), including the production of a dissertation of between 15,000 and 30,000 words. The MRes is a qualification in its own right, but is often undertaken by students as preparation for embarking on PhD level research.
  - An MPhil/MLitt route, in which the student undertakes research training and produces a dissertation of between 50,000 and 60,000 words (over two years full-time or up to five years part-time). Depending upon their progress, students embarking on this route do often transfer to PhD level research after the successful completion of

the first year. As such, this route is comparable with the existing Birmingham two-year MPhil programme.

By reference to the information supplied it can be seen that these models are also consistent with the provisions of the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England* and of the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

Therefore, the existing MPhil Mode A and MPhil Mode B programmes currently provided by the University do differ from the MPhil provision of other institutions, as identified by the external examiners, and are not consistent with external guidance from bodies such as the QAA. Furthermore, it is also apparent from comparison that there is no discernible difference between the MPhil Mode B and MRes programmes currently being provided by the University, which may also be viewed as a matter of confusion to prospective students.

### **Conclusions**

10. In view of the importance of the implications of the comments received from the external examiners, and the significance for the provision of postgraduate research at master's level across the University, and its potential impact on both current and future provision, it is argued that a consultative approach taking in views from across the University will provide the most effective mechanism for addressing this matter.
11. Any recommendations arising from such a review of postgraduate research will necessitate revision to University legislation, particularly to Ordinances, Regulations and Codes of Practice. It is most important that this is done in a co-ordinated manner, taking full account of the views from stakeholders across the University. Accordingly, a working group approach, making recommendations to APRC, has been advocated in this paper.

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**Extract from University of Birmingham Regulations**

**6.1.3 Research Degree Programmes**

6.1.3 (a) The University defines its research degree programmes as follows:

(i) One-year Master of Philosophy (MPhil)

Either

(Mode A): A programme, normally of one year's duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate training. Registered Students must produce a thesis containing research work of merit. Any training is expected to involve no more than the equivalent of 10 to 30 credits from a notional 180 credits for the programme; or

(Mode B): A programme, normally of one year's duration, of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme of 180 credits comprises between 30 and 70 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme together with one or more research report(s) or a thesis.

(ii) MMus

A programme, normally of one year's duration, of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme comprises 60 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme and a research project.

(iii) One year Master of Research (MRes)

A programme, normally of one year's duration of training in research with an emphasis on the acquisition of research skills. The programme comprises between 30 and 70 credits of taught modules from a notional 180 credits for the programme, together with one or more research report(s) or a thesis.

(iv) Two-year Master of Philosophy (MPhil)/Master of Letters (MLitt)

A programme, normally of two years' duration, in which the key activity is undertaking research, combined with appropriate training. Registered Students must produce a thesis containing original work of merit, worthy of publication. The training is expected to involve no more than the equivalent of 20 to 50 credits spread over the two years from a notional 360 credits for the programme.

**6.1.4 Research Degree Programmes with Taught Elements**

6.1.4 (a) The Professional Doctorate (including the EngD), PhD with Integrated Study, MMus, MRes and MPhil (B) are programmes consisting of a set of modules and a set of one or more reports. The modules have a defined set of learning outcomes including intellectual and practical skills which a Registered Student must complete to the satisfaction of a Board of Examiners in order to be eligible for the Award.

6.1.4 (b) For these programmes the following regulations in relation to modules and programme specifications shall apply: 6.1.2 (b) to 6.1.2 (o), above.

6.1.4 (c) Programmes may include modules consisting wholly or in part of work-based learning. Such modules shall be specified in programme requirements.

6.1.4 (d) All modules should be at level M or above, unless there are specific elements of the programme which make lower level study relevant. In this instance, the number of credits below level M should not exceed 20 credits at Level H or in exceptional circumstances at lower levels. Where any lower level credits are incorporated into a programme this should be added to the programme requirements and a rationale given for inclusion.

6.1.4 (e) The programme requirements for programmes leading to a Professional Doctorate (including the EngD), PhD with Integrated Study, MMus, MRes and MPhil(B) may provide for the award of a Postgraduate Certificate or a Masters degree upon completion of appropriate modules, unless Senate or delegated authority permits an exception.

### **6.2.3 Research Degree Programmes**

6.2.3 (a) The minimum and maximum periods of study permitted for programmes prescribed for research degrees of the University shall be:

| Award                     | Minimum period      | Maximum period      |
|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| One-year MRes             | 1 year (full-time)  | 2 years (full-time) |
| One-year MPhil (Mode A)   | 1 year (full-time)  | 2 years (full-time) |
| One-year MPhil (Mode B)   | 1 year (full-time)  | 2 years (full-time) |
| MMus                      | 1 year (full-time)  | 2 years (full-time) |
| Two-year MPhil            | 2 years (full-time) | 3 years (full-time) |
| Professional Doctorate    | 3 years (full-time) | 4 years (full-time) |
| PhD                       | 3 years (full-time) | 4 years (full-time) |
| PhD with Integrated Study | 4 years (full-time) | 5 years (full-time) |
| EngD                      | 4 years (full-time) | 5 years (full-time) |
| DDS                       | 2 years (part-time) | 6 years (part-time) |
| MD                        | 2 years (part-time) | 6 years (part-time) |

## **7.4 Research Degree Programmes – Assessment and Award**

### **7.4.1 Award Requirements**

7.4.1 (c) The thesis and other assessments for a research degree should demonstrate that the Registered Student:

- (i) has an adequate knowledge of the discipline within which the research is grounded and of the literature relevant to the research;
- (ii) is proficient in the relevant method(s) of research;
- (iii) has undertaken an independent investigation;
- (iv) can present information clearly; and

(v) can put forward arguments in an appropriate and coherent form.

7.4.1 (d) A thesis for the two-year MPhil should, in addition to the requirements set out above, contain original work of merit, worthy of publication in part or in whole, representing a significant contribution to knowledge, and demonstrating that the Registered Student can exercise independent judgement.

## 7.4.2 Format of theses or reports

7.4.2 (d) The maximum number of words in the thesis or report, excluding supplementary material such as tables, diagrams, appendices, references, the bibliography and any bound published material is as follows:

| College   | One Year MRes | One year MPhil (Mode B) | One year MPhil (Mode A) | Two year MPhil | Professional Doctorate | PhD    | PhD with Integrated Study | Eng D DDS MD |
|---|---------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Arts and Law; Social Sciences   | 20,000        | 20,000                  | 40,000                  | 60,000         | 50,000                 | 80,000 | 80,000                    | NA           |
| Dentistry, Health Sciences and Medicine; Life and Environmental Sciences; Engineering and Physics | 15,000        | 15,000                  | 30,000                  | 40,000         | 40,000                 | 50,000 | 50,000                    | 50,000       |

## 7.4.8 Transfer between Research Degree Programmes

7.4.8 In the following Regulation, Masters by Research refers to any programme leading to the award of a Master's degree assessed and awarded as a research postgraduate degree, including but not exclusively MPhil, MRes and MMus (as defined in Regulations 6.1.3 (a) (i-iv)).

7.4.8 (a) Transfer from one year Masters by Research to two-year MPhil/MLitt  
Transfer to the two-year MPhil/MLitt may be permitted by the Senate or under delegated authority, provided that the Registered Student has passed any taught elements and produced a satisfactory report or detailed research proposal in accordance with the requirements laid down by the Senate or under delegated authority. The time limits for the two-year MPhil/MLitt programme will be calculated from the initial date of registration for the one year Masters by Research.



Comparison of Research Degree Provision

| <b>Institution</b>                               | <b>Research Provision</b>  |
|--|--|
| University of Bristol                            | MRes: 1 year ft; 15,000 word dissertation<br>MLitt/MPhil: 2 years ft; 50,000 word dissertation                 |
| University of Cambridge                          | MPhil: 1 year ft; 20,000 word dissertation<br>MLitt: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation                      |
| Cardiff University                               | Masters by Research: 1 year ft; 20,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation        |
| University of Durham                             | MA by Research: 1 year ft; 50,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 70,000 word dissertation             |
| University of Edinburgh                          | MRes/MSc by Research: 1 year ft; 15,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation       |
| University of Glasgow                            | MPhil: 1-2 years ft; 30-40,000 word dissertation<br>MLitt: 2 years ft; 40-60,000 word dissertation.            |
| Imperial College, London                         | MRes: 1 year ft; 10,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation                       |
| University of Kent                               | MA by Research: 1 year ft; 30,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 50-60,000 words                      |
| Kings College, London                            | MRes: 1 year ft; 10,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation                       |
| University of Leeds                              | MA by Research: 1 year ft; 30,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation             |
| London School of Economics and Political Science | MRes: 1 year ft; 10,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation                       |
| University of Liverpool                          | MRes: 1 year ft; 15,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 1-3 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation                     |
| University of Manchester                         | MRes: 1 year ft; 10-12,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 1-2 years ft; 50,000 word dissertation                  |
| University of Newcastle                          | MRes/MSc by Research: 1 year ft; 15-18,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 1-2 years ft; 40,000 word dissertation  |
| University of Nottingham                         | MRes: 1 year ft; 30,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 1-2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation                     |
| University of Oxford                             | MPhil: 1-2 years ft; 20-25,000 word dissertation<br>MLitt: 2 years ft; 50,000 word dissertation                |
| Queen's University, Belfast                      | Masters by Research: 1 year ft; 15 -20,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 50,000 word dissertation    |
| University of Sheffield                          | Masters by Research: 1 year ft; 15 – 25,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 1-2 years ft; 40,000 word dissertation |
| University of Southampton                        | MRes: 1 year ft; 30,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 50,000 word dissertation                       |
| University College, London                       | MRes: 1 year ft; 20,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation                       |
| University of Warwick                            | Masters by Research: 1 year ft; 40,000 word dissertation<br>MPhil: 2 years ft; 60,000 word dissertation        |

**The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in  
England, Wales and Northern Ireland, August 2008**

**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.