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Student Assessment Handbook

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Introduction

Assessment of your essays is the means by which the University evaluates your success in your studies. In each essay you will receive a mark and some comments and it's important that you can see how your mark was arrived at.

All assessment is guided by the educational level (i.e., MA – known as Level 7) and subject descriptions provided by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the national body tasked with overseeing all higher education. The University itself has adapted the official QAA MA/Level 7 criteria.

The purpose of this handbook is to explain the logic behind the assessment criteria which are used to mark your essays.

What is a Taught MA?

A taught MA is a transitional degree between BA and research degrees such as MPhil and PhD. In some respects it can be compared to the fourth year of an undergraduate degree, but the research component, the Dissertation, can also be seen as a preparation for a MPhil/PhD.

As a generic qualification, a Master's degree can be on any subject – history, anthropology, music technology or, in the case of the MSc, physics, chemistry, or botany. As such, certain common standards have to be met and assessment therefore has a dual purpose.

First, it tests the level to which such common standards are achieved in skills such as critical thinking skills and communication.

Second, it tests the extent to which these standards are met in terms of the particular subject – such as Cultural Astronomy and Astrology, and Ecology and Spirituality.

It follows that knowledge of the subject area is one component in assessment, but that the ability to analyse, debate, and reflect on this knowledge - and reach balanced and, if possible, original conclusions – is another component.

The purpose of studying for an MA is to acquire intellectual skills and/or refine those you have already. It is not to reinforce an existing point of view: instead, everything, including your own opinions and beliefs, can be up for question. In many ways a course of academic study is a journey and you may emerge not only with fresh skills but new opinions and attitudes.

The background

The ultimate framework for standards of both teaching and assessment is provided by the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) generic descriptor for a qualification at Masters level. It is important to know what the QAA actually stipulates and the full version is given in this handbook as Appendix 1.

The four main paragraphs state that, in the course of their MA studies, students should acquire:

- i. 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.
- ii. A comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship;
- iii. 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;
- iv. Conceptual understanding that enables the student: to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; and to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

The QAA then goes on to deal with what it calls 'transferable skills', such as the ability to communicate clearly and effectively or use IT, which may be useful in students' future professional or academic development.

The MA as a whole has 'learning outcomes' which are derived from the QAA, and these are then refined into learning outcomes for each module. These are often framed in quite general terms but become the basis for all the essay titles, research projects and marking in each module.

The next stage is to construct assessment criteria which are designed to test the extent to which you have achieved the learning outcomes.

Guides for Writing

Good writing is crucial. Without it no marker can judge whether you have fulfilled the assessment criteria.

What we're looking for in assessment.

There are a number of features which should be included if an essay is to be considered MA Level. In particular an MA essay is expected:

- To take a critical and analytical approach to the sources and data, examining a question. and posing a conclusion based on careful evaluation of the evidence.
- To relate to other academic work, including recently published work in the field and is expected to show an awareness of theoretical and/or methodological issues.
- To show that you have approached the material by posing your own questions, and reached an original conclusion. Originality in this sense means not coming up

with ideas that have never been thought of before, but framing your discussion and conclusion in line with your analysis of the primary and secondary sources.

- To show fluent writing, a good grasp of grammar, and clear organisation of the material; all are essential.

Assessment check lists

The assessment criteria are summarised in the following bullet points. These are then reproduced in the marking sheets, which are included as appendices to this handbook. Included below are the separate factors marked in written assignments, oral presentations and dissertations.

Each essay is accompanied by an assessment guide which set out the specific requirements for that essay. In general, though, all marking criteria are drawn from the following list:

The coursework should:

Subject area:

- Demonstrate comprehensive and systematic understanding of the subject matter.
- Discussion and analysis provide an academic context and rationale for the research.
- Examine contemporary or historical trends and developments in the subject area.
- Report the ideas, beliefs and/or practices of others with accuracy and understanding.
- Recognize and discuss the contested nature and/or origin of different types of evidence and source material.
- Engage critically with debates in recent scholarship.
- Discuss appropriate theoretical and/or methodological questions.
- Reach a reasoned and balanced conclusion based on evaluation of the nature and scope of evidence.

Research:

- Make appropriate use of primary sources.
- Make critical use of secondary sources.
- Comply with principles of good practice and observe research ethics, where appropriate.
- Reflect on the role and impact of the researcher, where appropriate (i.e., in qualitative research).

Writing and structure:

- Employ a clear and logical structure.
- Express ideas clearly in a scholarly style, avoiding spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors.

- Present work in a typed or word-processed form to the wordage specified, complete with references, bibliography and supporting material.

In each assessment, markers comments:

- Should refer back to the required criteria .
- Relate to the marks given.
- Be positive in tone and emphasise areas for improvement, as well as strengths.

Essays are submitted on Turnitin, on your subject Moodle page. You first upload to the Frat submission page, which checks for plagiarism. Most essays have a plagiarism score of around 30%

Markers will insert comments in your text and then write general comments. These are then contained in a PDF which will be emailed to you by the module tutor, but which you can also download from Turnitin.

Each essay is first marked, then either second marked or moderated (moderated comments are shorter). A sample of essays and marks are then reviewed by a third member of staff, the internal moderator, and a selection of these are sent to an External Examiner who then reports to a University and Board.

Appendix 1

Generic Description of MA study drawn up by the Quality Assurance Agency

https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/master's-degree-characteristics-statement8019abbe03dc611ba4caff140043ed24.pdf?sfvrsn=86c5ca81_12

Much of the study undertaken at Masters level will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Students will have shown originality in the application of knowledge, and they will understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research. They will be able to deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, and they will show originality in tackling and solving problems.

They will have the qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgement, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

Masters degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses, programmes of research, or a mixture of both. Longer, research based programmes often lead to the degree of MPhil. Most Masters courses are taken by honours graduates, but some Masters degrees in science and engineering are awarded after extended undergraduate programmes that last, typically, a year longer than honours degree programmes. Also at this level are advanced short courses, often forming parts of Continuing Professional Development programmes, leading to Postgraduate Certificates and Diplomas. (NB The MAs granted by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are not academic qualifications.)

Masters degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- i 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;
- ii a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship;
- iii 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;
- iv conceptual understanding that enables the student:
 - to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; and
 - to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- a. deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make informed judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- b. demonstrate self direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level;
- c. continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level; and will have:
- d. the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
 - the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility,
 - decision making in complex and unpredictable situations, and
 - the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.

Assessment Grading and Criteria

Mark	Grade Descriptor	Notes
70 and above	Excellent or outstanding	Pass with distinction
50 to 69	Satisfactory or good	Pass
40-49	Marginal fail	Fail
0-39	Poor fail	Fail

Detailed grade descriptions

70% and above PASS WITH DISTINCTION

General Treatment: extensive, comprehensive coverage of the topic.

Writing and Expression: exceptional, fluent quality, with clarity, academic style and an absence of grammatical errors.

Reading and Research: extensive and applied with originality; impressive use of primary sources; employs contextual literature in cognate and related disciplines.

Discussion: Analytical and critical, engages with scholarship in the field, evaluates competing perspectives, including new developments in the field.

Presentation: Very high standard with full references and bibliography, presented in a style consistent with the guidelines.

60-69% and above PASS

General Treatment: Full coverage of the topic.

Writing and Expression: Fluent prose that demonstrates a good understanding of terms, concepts and technical vocabulary.

Reading and Research: Substantial in range and coverage; strong use of primary sources; effectively deployed as evidence.

Discussion: Presents a sustained, analytical argument, with reference to the latest scholarship and competing theories.

Presentation: high standard with full references and bibliography, presented in a consistent style.

50-59% and above PASS

General Treatment: Relevant to the topic; competent engagement with a range of issues.

Writing and Expression: Clear and accurate; fluent prose presents a good argument with an awareness of competing issues.

Reading and Research: Adequate and effectively utilised.

Discussion: Presents a sustained argument, showing awareness of theoretical and methodological issues and relevant current debates.

Presentation: appropriate with satisfactory references and bibliography.

40-49% FAIL (Marginal Fail)

General Treatment: Weaknesses in understanding the material; limited scope.

Writing and Expression: Unclear, inaccurate, with lapses in style and grammatical errors.

Reading and Research: Inadequate or poorly utilised.

Discussion: Contains flaws, inconsistencies, unsubstantiated assertions and a lack of awareness of theoretical issues.

Presentation: Untidy, unclear, with poor or inconsistent references and bibliography.

0-39% FAIL

General Treatment: Not relevant to the topic.

Writing and Expression: Muddled, unstructured, an excess of grammatical errors.

Reading and Research: Inadequate, limited in scope.

Discussion: Failure to analyse evidence or engage in debate.

Presentation: Untidy, disorganised.