

Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board

Quality Assurance Review Process

Graduate Degree Level Standards

Approved May 14, 2014



The information presented in this document is used by the Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board (SHEQAB) to conduct quality assurance reviews of institutions seeking authorization to provide master's or doctoral degrees pursuant to *The Degree Authorization Act*.

These standards were approved
by the Minister of Advanced Education May 14, 2014.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----------|
| 1. Introduction | 1 |
| 2. Master's Degrees | 2 |
| Characteristics of Master's Degrees | 2 |
| Dimensions of Specialized Knowledge for a Master's Degree | 3 |
| Master's Program Typology | 4 |
| 3. Doctoral Degrees | 5 |
| Characteristics of Doctoral Degrees | 5 |
| Dimensions of Specialized Knowledge for Doctoral Degrees | 6 |

1. Introduction

In 2007, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) endorsed a *Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada*. The CMEC Statement, to which Saskatchewan is a signatory, includes the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework (CDQF), which addresses:

- The salient characteristics of degrees at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels;
- Degree level standards, which describe the demonstrable learning skills and level of mastery required of graduates at each degree level; and
- Procedures and standards for assessing new degree-granting institutions and proposed new degree programs.

The CDQF provides a common foundation for the quality assurance reviews of degree-granting institutions and degree programs across Canada.

An institution seeking authorization pursuant to *The Degree Authorization Act* for a graduate level program must ensure that the program has characteristics and learning outcomes consistent with those presented in this document, which are directly based on the CDQF. These requirements are intended to:

- Facilitate the assessment of credentials for the broad purpose of credit transfer and credential recognition;
- Promote the recognition of Saskatchewan graduates both nationally and internationally; and
- Serve as a foundation for Saskatchewan's quality assurance review process.

The **characteristics** of master's and doctoral degree programs are categorized as follows:

- a) Program Design and Outcome Emphasis
- b) Preparation for Employment and Further Study
- c) Length of Program
- d) Admission Requirements.

Degree level standards, which specify the **learning outcomes** required for master's and doctoral degree programs, are categorized in the following six dimensions:

1. Depth and Breadth of Knowledge
2. Knowledge of Methodologies
3. Application of Knowledge
4. Communication Skills
5. Awareness of Limits of Knowledge
6. Professional Capacity/Autonomy

In addition, for master's degrees, a typology is presented which describes the various types or categories of master's programs commonly offered in Canada. The Ministry of Advanced Education wishes to acknowledge, with thanks, the *Graduate Program Proposal Guidelines and Assessment Standards* of the Campus Alberta Quality Council as the source of this typology.

2. Master's Degrees

Characteristics of Master's Degrees

a) Program Design and Outcome Emphasis

A master's degree program builds on the knowledge and competencies acquired during related undergraduate study, and requires more specialized knowledge and intellectual autonomy than a bachelor's degree program. Much of the study undertaken at the master's level will have been at, or informed by, the forefront of an academic or professional discipline. Students will have shown some 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 independent capacity in addressing issues and problems.

Research-oriented master's programs are typically for graduates of related undergraduate or professional programs in the field or students who have taken bridging studies to equip them for graduate study in the field; the focus is on developing the research, analytical, methodological, interpretive, and expository skills necessary for doctoral studies or for leadership in society. Some programs are thesis-based and require the student to develop and demonstrate advanced research skills under supervision. Others are course-based and require students to demonstrate the necessary research, analytical, interpretative, methodological, and expository skills in course exercises.

Examples: Master of Arts (MA) programs in the humanities and social sciences; Master of Science (MSc) programs

Profession-oriented master's programs normally admit students holding baccalaureate degrees and provide them with a selection of courses and exercises intended to prepare them for a particular profession or field of practice or, if they are already involved in the profession or field, to extend their knowledge base and skills as professionals/practitioners.

Example: Master of Social Work (MSW) programs

b) Preparation for Employment and Further Study

Graduates will have the qualities needed for either further study in the discipline or for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgment, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

c) Length of Program

Master's programs vary typically from two to six semesters, depending on the field and the speed at which individuals progress through requirements.

d) Admission Requirements

Normally, an undergraduate degree with an appropriate specialization or an undergraduate degree with relevant bridging studies.

Dimensions of Specialized Knowledge for a Master's Degree

1. Depth and Breadth of Knowledge

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.

2. Knowledge of Methodologies and Research

A conceptual understanding and methodological competence that enables the graduate to:

- a) Have a working comprehension of how established techniques of research and inquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline.
- b) Have a capacity to evaluate critically current research and advanced research and scholarship in the discipline or area of professional competence, and on the basis of that competence, have shown at least one of the following: (i) the development and support of a sustained argument in written form or (ii) originality in the application of knowledge.

3. Application of Knowledge

The capacity to (i) address complex issues and judgments based on established principles and techniques and (ii) apply an existing body of knowledge in the research and critical analysis of a new question or of a specific problem or issue in a new setting.

4. Communication Skills

The ability to communicate ideas, issues, and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences.

5. Awareness of Limits of Knowledge

A cognizance of the complexity of knowledge and of the potential contributions of other interpretations, methods, and disciplines.

6. Professional Capacity/Autonomy

- a) The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring (i) the exercise of initiative and of personal responsibility and accountability; and (ii) decision-making in complex situations, such as employment.
- b) The intellectual independence required for continuing professional development.
- c) The ability to appreciate the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts.

Master's Program Typology

Master's programs may be structured in a variety of ways, and may be highly individualized and customized to meet the needs of specific students. The typology which follows is not prescriptive, and, while the types listed here are the major categories, not all of them are discrete.

For example, a professional Master's degree in Education may be thesis or course based. In addition, some graduate degrees may be categorized as interdisciplinary or collaborative degrees. It is the responsibility of the applicant institution to clearly indicate the characteristics of the proposed degree.

Course-Based

Course-based master's programs leading to Master of Arts (MA) or Master of Science (MSc) degrees have a limited emphasis on research, exhibited by, for example, the requirement to include one or more research courses in the program, with the final course grade based on a research paper, or by requiring the inclusion of a capstone course toward the end of the program to focus on the integration and application of the knowledge acquired. These programs may culminate in a comprehensive examination or a major paper involving an examination committee.

Thesis-Based

Thesis-based master's programs leading to Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc), or Master of Education (MEd) degrees require the student to develop a research plan for a specific project, in consultation with the supervisor, which will enable the student to learn the accepted research methodology in the field and to apply it to the generation of new knowledge. A report on the research completed and its results and conclusions are presented in a master's thesis, following which the student must pass a final oral examination based on the thesis. A thesis oral examination committee is involved.

Professional/Practice-Based

Professional master's programs [e.g., MSW (Social Work), MPH (Public Health), MEng (Engineering)] are practice-oriented programs which, while providing instruction in research methods, are designed to prepare students for professional practice involving the application or transmission of existing knowledge, and lead to a professional degree designation. Institutions may require the student to engage in some independent research culminating in a capstone project or a thesis, examined by a committee. That independent work may involve original or applied research or a combination which supports the advancement of a profession. Programs which combine both research and professional objectives should use a degree designation which recognizes the priority given to these objectives.

3. Doctoral Degrees

Characteristics of Doctoral Degrees

a) Program Design and Outcome Emphasis

A doctoral program builds on the knowledge and competencies in a field or discipline acquired during prior study, usually at the graduate level. Study at the doctoral level is at the forefront of an academic or professional discipline.

Holders of the doctoral degree must have demonstrated a high degree of intellectual autonomy, an ability to conceptualize, design, and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding, and an ability to create and interpret knowledge that extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research or creative activity

Preparation for doctoral work may involve course work of varying lengths aimed at cultivating further conceptual depth or breadth. It may also involve written and oral examinations of knowledge and skills in aspects of the discipline prior to authorization to proceed to work on a dissertation.

Research-oriented doctoral programs focus on the development of the conceptual and methodological knowledge and skills required to do original research and to make an original contribution to knowledge in the form of a dissertation. In some fields an internship or exhibition component may be required, but without diluting the significance of the dissertation as the primary demonstration of mastery. Such programs lead to the award of the PhD.

Examples: PhD (Psychology), PhD (Education), PhD (Music)

Practice-oriented doctoral programs are of a more applied nature, relate to a professional or creative activity and, where there is an internship or exhibition requirement, may also require a dissertation. Doctoral programs with an orientation to practice typically involve more course work than doctoral programs with a more theoretical or disciplinary focus. Such programs lead to the award of a degree designation reflecting the field or discipline.

Examples: EdD (Education), MusDoc (Music), PsyD (Psychology).

b) Preparation for Employment and Further Study

Holders of doctorates will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the ability to make informed judgments on complex issues in specialist fields, and innovation in tackling and solving problems.

c) Length of Program

A doctoral program is typically three to six years in length, depending on the field and the speed at which individuals progress through requirements.

d) Admission Requirements

Normally, a master's degree with an appropriate specialization or a master's degree with appropriate bridging studies.

Dimensions of Specialized Knowledge for Doctoral Degrees**1. Depth and Breadth of Knowledge**

A thorough understanding of a substantial body of knowledge that is at the forefront of their academic discipline or area of professional practice.

2. Knowledge of Methodologies and Research

A conceptual understanding and methodological competence that provides the graduate with the ability to:

- a) Conceptualize, design, and implement research for the generation of new knowledge, applications, or understanding at the forefront of the discipline and to adjust the research design or methodology in the light of unforeseen problems;
- b) Make informed judgments on complex issues in specialist fields, sometimes requiring new methods; and
- c) Produce original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, and to merit publication.

3. Application of Knowledge

The capacity to (i) undertake pure and/or applied research at an advanced level and (ii) contribute to the development of academic or professional skill, techniques, tools, practices, ideas, theories, approaches, and/or materials.

4. Communication Skills

The ability to communicate complex and/or ambiguous ideas, issues, and conclusions clearly and effectively.

5. Awareness of Limits of Knowledge

An appreciation of the limitations of one's own work and discipline, of the complexity of knowledge, and of the potential contributions of other interpretations, methods, and disciplines.

6. Professional Capacity/Autonomy

- a) The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex situations.
- b) The intellectual independence to be academically and professionally engaged and current.
- c) The ability to evaluate the broader implications of applying knowledge.

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