

Summary of responses to question 9

| Question 9: Does the qualification descriptor remain appropriate for different types of doctoral graduates? | | | |
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| | Numbers and percentages | | Additional comments |
| | Number | % of total | |
| | | | The next three rows provide an overview of responses to question 9. The rest of this table summarises the comments and suggestions received, sub-divided into broad groups. |
| Total number of responses to the consultation: | 72 | 100% | Twelve (17 per cent) of respondents to the discussion paper made no comment about this question. |
| Number answering this question: | 60 | 83% | |
| <p>The majority of respondents think the doctoral qualification descriptor remains appropriate. Some respondents linked their comments about question 7 with question 9. The two are closely linked: question 7 asked explicitly about the attributes of doctoral candidates summarised in the descriptor; question 9 was designed to capture respondents' views about the descriptor generally, including its continuing suitability to apply to graduates with different types of doctoral qualifications. Those who did respond to question 9 seem to have interpreted it as intended. While 92 per cent of respondents, in response to question 7, said the doctoral attributes outlined in the existing qualification descriptor remain appropriate, 75 per cent of respondents agreed that the descriptor as a whole is still appropriate for different types of doctoral graduate.</p> | | | |
| <p>Comments on the doctoral qualification descriptor attributes Please note that some respondents are counted more than once in the sub-categories below, because they made several comments.</p> | | | |
| a Yes, the <i>Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland</i> (FHEQ) qualification descriptor is still appropriate for all forms of doctorate. | 54 | 75% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of specificity in the attributes helps them to remain appropriate. • It is important to have a means of interpreting a candidate's research within its specific context, thus allowing for diversity of outcomes of doctoral degrees. • The way in which the attributes are set out means that there can be changes in the balance between different elements of the descriptor (enabling them to be interpreted according to context, as mentioned above). • Although different doctorates have different word |

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| | | | <p>lengths for the thesis and the focus of research may be different, assessment criteria and academic standards remain the same.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The requirements under sections i to iv of the descriptor should be pre-eminent. |
| <p>Some of the respondents who agreed that the descriptor was still widely applicable for different types of doctoral graduate also had suggestions for additions or amendments to the descriptor, which are included in the sub-categories shown below.</p> | | | |
| <p>b The descriptor, although general enough to remain broadly applicable, would benefit from the addition of specific details to reflect the attributes of graduates of professional doctorates and some of the more recently established PhDs. Some making these points also acknowledge that section c of the descriptor has enough breadth to cover a range of doctorates.</p> | 13 | 18% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The descriptor could be expanded to cover the application or interpretation of existing knowledge in new situations. • It is necessary to maintain strict parity of all doctoral awards for the benefit of both candidates and employers. • It is important not to imply that one [form of doctorate] is better than the other; this would be a risk if you tried to distinguish between PhDs and professional doctorates in the qualification descriptor. • All doctorates should be treated equally, as both the PhD and the professional doctorate meet the same core standards. Any attempt to use different titles to distinguish between different types of doctorate may [erroneously] imply a hierarchy of qualifications. Different qualification titles could also result in an unnecessary plethora of qualifications, giving rise to confusion. This respondent also emphasises the importance of diversity of purpose and delivery of doctoral qualifications. • The descriptor needs to be more comprehensive so as to be clear about the different forms of doctorate that exist and to emphasise there is no difference in level between them; the diversity of award is in response to demand but qualifications are equivalent at the level of the award. • PhDs and professional doctorates need to start to resemble one another more closely - research is a profession and those wishing to adopt it as a career need formal training in the ethics, law, impact on society and methods of their chosen profession. The higher education sector should explore the concept of 'fitness to practice' for researchers as well as other professionals. • The existing descriptor does not necessarily cover practice-based doctorates sufficiently. • It is unlikely that a single, more refined, definition of 'originality' would be appropriate to all kinds of doctorate. Professional doctorates require |

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| | | | supplementary (specific) learning outcomes which relate to the directed study elements of such programmes. Employers should be made aware of these additional learning outcomes. |
| c It would be useful to qualify the term 'research'. | 1 | 1% | One respondent suggested that a definition of research as 'investigative or creative work' should be included in the qualification descriptor (as well as being used to amend the definition of research programmes in the <i>Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes</i>). |
| d Lack of use of the qualification descriptor by examiners of doctoral candidates. | 1 | 1% | One respondent commented that only a minority of doctoral examiners draw on the candidate's home institution's definition of a doctorate, still less the QAA's doctoral qualification descriptor, when carrying out examining duties. |

Summary of additional comments

Below is a summary of comments made by respondents who said that doctoral qualification descriptor in the FHEQ remains appropriate to different types of doctoral graduate.

| Response number | Summary of comments made by respondent |
|-----------------|---|
| 5 | The attributes are sufficiently general to remain broadly applicable. For example, they recognise advanced scholarship as well as new knowledge. |
| 31 | The attributes...apply across the PhD and professional doctorates. |
| 48 | These are extremely helpful. We use them in training supervisors, informing students and also send them to internal and external examiners. We specifically ask examiners to reflect on the descriptor when their judgements are borderline. |
| 55 | The attributes are open to interpretation (perhaps a good thing as it allows flexibility). |
| 56 | As a set of generic criteria for study and attainment the FHEQ descriptor provides an excellent set of concise benchmarks for doctoral study. The initial four capacities cover innovation, rigour, real-world ability to actualise a research project, and research skills. The three latter capacities encourage broader contextual abilities including communication, transferable skills and developing a research agenda. In this respect they are exhaustive as well as providing a necessarily artificial, but consequently clear, delineation between areas of attainment. Implications that these attributes do not meet industry's requirements are unfounded: lack of commercial awareness cannot be remedied by the inclusion of a 'commercial' criterion in the descriptors, and commercial awareness is not appropriate for all disciplines; commercial awareness is implied by 'making informed judgement on complex issues in specialist fields, often in |

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| | the absence of complete data'. Similarly, over-specialisation should be addressed by criteria iv and b in the descriptor. There is a need to avoid an excessively academic interpretation of the descriptors, which should be read as guidelines for training specialists adaptable to a variety of work environments, academic and non-academic. If the quality of doctoral study is to be retained, the descriptor needs to be explained in more detail for institutions and supervisory teams, rather than rewritten, and skills development seen in its wider context. |
| 59 | The institution is generally comfortable with the descriptor, with some degree of flexibility of interpretation for specific programmes. |
| 65 | The doctoral descriptor in the FHEQ is satisfactory and should be left alone. |
| 68 | The FHEQ provides an appropriate description of the attributes of both PhD and professional doctorate programmes. |
| 69 | The organisation is not aware of significant concerns amongst its members relating to the current qualification descriptor. It supports the current emphasis in the descriptor that doctorates should be research-based and focus on excellence and that original research should be a key element of the doctorate. |
| 72 | The FHEQ descriptor remains valid and has formed the basis of the learning outcomes for the institution's doctoral programmes. |