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## Degrees of Degrees

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## Degrees of Degrees

by Neil K. Dickson

Like others, I first became interested in academic dress at school through seeing the teachers in gowns and different colours of hoods at the annual prizegiving. After leaving school I was a student at the Universities of St Andrews and Oxford before joining the staff of the University of Glasgow. Their ceremonies were quite different from each other. At St Andrews and Glasgow the staff wore a rich variety of different gowns and hoods while at Oxford most of the staff were wearing exactly the same gown and hood. Why? This caused me to realize that, in order to understand the customs surrounding the wearing of academic dress, it is necessary to understand the history of how and when degrees are awarded, and how and when people acquire the right to wear academic dress.

In this article I therefore look at the types of degrees that can be awarded by universities and colleges. I discuss the rights and privileges that go with a degree such as the right to wear academic dress and put letters after your name. I look at the ways in which individuals may be given the right to wear academic dress without being awarded a degree. I focus on current and historical practice in Britain, and most of my examples are from British universities. However, what I say also applies to other countries, such as Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where the higher education system was historically influenced by British practice, and I draw attention to some examples of that.

I frequently mention the practice of individual universities, which for brevity I refer to by the name of the city or town in which they are located, or by shortened versions of their names. For example, Oxford means the University of Oxford and Harvard means Harvard University. Throughout this article I use the term Bachelor degrees to refer collectively to degrees such as Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Medicine, and similarly Master degrees and Doctor degrees.

### Names of degrees

Bachelor, Master and Doctor degrees, which existed in continental Europe from the thirteenth century,<sup>1</sup> had already developed in Britain by the middle of the fifteenth century<sup>2</sup> and spread from there to other countries. The Associate degree, mainly to be found in North America, emerged in the late nineteenth century and the Foundation Degree was introduced in Britain at the very beginning of the twenty-first century. The Associate and Foundation degrees are below Bachelor level and can be used as an alternative route towards a Bachelor degree.

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1 W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *A History of Academical Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963; reprinted Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 2–4.

2 See R. G. Cant, *The University of St Andrews: A Short History*, 3rd edn (St Andrews: St Andrews University Library, 1992), pp. 7, 9, and J. D. Mackie, *The University of Glasgow 1451 to 1951: A Short History* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Company, 1951), pp. 5, 7.

Originally, universities were divided into faculties or subject areas. Arts was the general studies faculty with a curriculum that included elements of language, philosophy, science and mathematics. There were also specialist faculties such as Divinity, Law and Medicine. Each faculty had two degrees: the degrees in Arts were Bachelor and Master, while the degrees in the specialist faculties were Bachelor and Doctor.<sup>3</sup> A Bachelor degree in any faculty was regarded as the first step towards Master or Doctor, not a full qualification in its own right, and the Master of Arts degree was normally a prerequisite for studying in the specialist faculties. At an early stage it was recognized that there were different branches of law, such as civil and canon (religious) law. This caused degrees such as Doctor of Civil Law and Doctor of Laws<sup>4</sup> to emerge.

In medicine, the Scottish universities struggled over a lengthy period to provide medical teaching and had difficult relationships with the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons before emerging as centres of excellence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the only medical degree they offered was Doctor of Medicine.<sup>5</sup> Universities in Canada and the United States of America adopted that system, resulting in Doctor of Medicine becoming the primary medical qualification in North America. This is also one of the reasons why qualified medical practitioners became referred to as doctors, and continue to be referred to as such, even in Scotland and the rest of Britain where reforms in the middle of the nineteenth century re-established the degree of Bachelor of Medicine and re-defined it to be the British primary medical qualification. As a result, most British medical practitioners do not hold a Doctor degree. In the early twentieth century quite a number of British medical practitioners who wanted to be Doctors of Medicine but did not wish to undertake the advanced study and research required for the British Doctor of Medicine degree sat examinations at Brussels in Belgium or Lausanne in Switzerland and obtained the degree from there. One consequence was the creation of British-style academic dress for Brussels and Lausanne MD degrees: full-shaped hoods of scarlet cloth lined with light blue silk and scarlet cloth lined with watered virgin blue silk, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

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3 It is unclear why the first degree in all faculties shared the same name (Bachelor) while different names (Master and Doctor) were used for the second degree, especially since Oxford had (and still has) a single name, *incepting*, for the process of taking the second degree: for example, incepting in Arts means taking the degree of Master of Arts and incepting in Divinity means taking the degree of Doctor of Divinity.

4 Laws here originally meant both laws: civil and canon. Present-day degrees of Bachelor, Master and Doctor of Laws retain the name but have lost the meaning. For example, Glasgow still uses *uris utriusque* (of both laws) in the Latin names of the degrees but the degrees are not qualifications in canon law.

5 See Cant, pp. 105, 133, and Mackie, pp. 252–53, 273–74.

6 There is a question as to whether the British-style hoods for the Brussels and Lausanne MD and certain Doctor degrees from Göttingen in Germany were officially authorized, as can be seen from different editions of *The Degrees and Hoods of the World's Universities and Colleges*. The third edition by Frank Haycraft (1927) includes these hoods; the fourth edition by E. W. Scobie Stringer (1948) omits them, with a note on p. 7 explaining they were not officially authorized and had been included previously due to incorrect information; and the fifth edition by Charles A. H. Franklyn and others (1972) restores them with a note on p. 32 in which Franklyn does not disclose a personal interest as the holder of a Lausanne MD. Franklyn describes the hoods and the gowns to be worn with them in detail in *Academical Dress from the Middle Ages to the Present Day Including Lambeth Degrees* (Lewes: W. E. Baxter Ltd, 1970), p. 211.

Over time degrees were introduced in additional subject areas such as Music and Science, or in more specialized subjects. As Arts developed from a general studies area into a specialized area, additional degrees in Arts were instituted such as Bachelor and Doctor of Letters. An ambiguity developed over some Bachelor degrees, such as Bachelor of Science. In some universities they were offered as first degrees, while in others an Arts degree continued to be a prerequisite. It took about a hundred years, from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth centuries, for a new norm to emerge, namely that Bachelor was a first degree in any subject or subject area (recognized as a full qualification in its own right); Master was the next step (for those who wished to undertake further study) and Doctor the highest degree available. As part of that development some Bachelor degrees were restructured as first degrees while others were renamed as Masters.<sup>7</sup>

Scarcely had that system settled when growing specialism in science caused a desire in Britain for enhanced first degrees that included some elements of research. These new degrees were given the name Master. There are therefore now two types of Master degrees: enhanced first degrees, and postgraduate degrees for which a Bachelor degree is a prerequisite. The first type tends to have more specialized names such as Master of Chemistry or Master of Physics while broader names such as Master of Science tend to apply to the second type (but Master in Science is sometimes used for the first type with the abbreviation MSci).<sup>8</sup>

There are also significant historical anomalies in relation to the Master of Arts degree. In Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin and the four ancient Scottish universities,<sup>9</sup> vestiges remain of the original system that a complete course of study in Arts yielded first the Bachelor of Arts degree and then the Master of Arts degree. In Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin, study and examination now results in the Bachelor of Arts degree, with a right to take the Master of Arts degree after a certain lapse of time without further study or examination, so that Master of Arts is now an award of seniority and status, not an additional qualification. In the four ancient Scottish universities, the Bachelor of Arts degree was abolished in the middle of the nineteenth century, so that Master of Arts is a first degree.<sup>10</sup>

In general, over time, there has been a tendency towards more and more specialized names of Bachelor, Master and Doctor degrees—but there have also been some moves in the other direction.

7 For example, LLB at Scottish universities was restructured from requiring an MA to be a first degree, while BLitt at Oxford was renamed MLitt and existing holders of the BLitt could apply for a new MLitt degree certificate: *University of Oxford Statutes and Regulations* (referred to from now on as *Oxford Statutes*), Regulations for Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates, 1.5, <[www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/)>.

8 There is also another issue here. Should degrees use of or in? For example, Master *of* Arts or Master *in* Arts, Artium Magister or Magister in Artibus? It appears that in both English and Latin *in* was the original form but *of* gained ground until it became the norm. *In* can still be found. For example, Dublin continues to use *in* in both English and Latin, while Cambridge uses *in* in Latin but *of* in English: *The 2010 Consolidated Statutes of Trinity College Dublin and of the University of Dublin including updates to 22 May 2019* (referred to from now on as the *Dublin Statutes*), Table on Degrees, p. 163, <[www.tcd.ie/registrars/statutes/](http://www.tcd.ie/registrars/statutes/)> and *University of Cambridge Statutes and Ordinances for 2019* (referred to from now on as the *Cambridge Statutes*), Ch. II, Forms of Admission to Degrees, <[www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/so/](http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/so/)>.

9 St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh.

10 In the late twentieth century Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh reintroduced BA degrees but with curricula distinct from the MA degree, which continues to be their principal first degree in Arts.

The most notable was the development of the Doctor of Philosophy degree. Here philosophy does not mean the specialized subject of that name, rather it uses the original meaning of the word as the ‘pursuit of wisdom and knowledge.’<sup>11</sup> The Doctor of Philosophy degree is awarded for original research in any subject and is designed to be taken immediately after a first degree. It originated in Germany in the early nineteenth century, spread to North America in the mid-nineteenth century but did not arrive in Britain until the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

Some other degrees were created in the late twentieth century with names deliberately not tied to a subject area, such as Master of Studies. Another example to be referred to later is Doctor of the University.

Another late-twentieth-century development was the emergence of specialized Doctor degrees for professional practitioners, such as Doctor of Clinical Psychology.

### Rights and privileges

An important day for all students is when, after completing their studies and passing their examinations, they are admitted to their degrees and become entitled to all the associated rights and privileges.

Historically, these rights and privileges were significant. For example, at one time the Master of Arts degree carried with it a licence to teach anywhere in the Western Christian world (that is, in any country that recognized the supremacy of the pope in Rome).<sup>13</sup> Holders of certain British degrees used to elect Members of Parliament who represented their universities.<sup>14</sup>

Today, the rights and privileges tend to be more limited. Holders of degrees are usually members of a body often called Convocation that represents the views of degree holders to the university.<sup>15</sup> They often have power to elect some of the members of the university’s governing body and certain university officials such as the chancellor. Privileges may include continued but limited access to the university’s library facilities. Holding one degree may confer the right to apply for other degrees.<sup>16</sup>

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11 *The Chambers Dictionary* (app edition).

12 For a detailed analysis see Renate Simpson, *How the PhD Came to Britain: A Century of Struggle for Postgraduate Education* (Guildford: Society for Research into Higher Education, 1983). Its late arrival in Britain meant that until the late twentieth century it was not a requirement for a successful academic career in Britain, especially in Arts subjects: see, for example, staff without a PhD in *St Andrews University Calendar 1971–72*.

13 The licence *ubique docendi*: Cant, p. 6. Receiving the licence was actually a separate step that took place before receiving the Master of Arts degree. Some universities such as St Andrews combined both into one ceremony (see Cant, p. 23). Others such as Glasgow had separate ceremonies but those receiving licences were under oath to present themselves within four months for the Master of Arts degree (see Mackie, p. 31).

14 The parliamentary constituencies of the British universities were abolished in 1950. In Ireland, holders of Dublin degrees still elect three members of Seanad Eireann (the upper house of the Irish Parliament), as do holders of National University of Ireland degrees.

15 Other names for such a body include General Council (for example at St Andrews) and Senate (for example at Cambridge) though care is needed because some other universities use Senate to mean the body consisting of staff only that is responsible for academic policy (for example at St Andrews).

16 For example, some Doctor degrees at some universities are restricted to members of staff and people who already hold a degree from that university.

There are still some public manifestations of rights and privileges. There is the right to wear academic dress. There is the right to use the style and title of your degree. For example, if you have received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, you are entitled to describe yourself as a Doctor of Philosophy, to put the letters PhD (or DPhil, depending on the university) after your name, or put the title Dr in front of your name. Later in this article I discuss further the practice of putting letters after your name.

## Types of degrees

This article has so far focused on degrees obtained by study and examination, but these are not the only types of degrees. The custom of universities awarding honorary degrees on distinguished (and sometimes, it is alleged, not too distinguished) persons is well known. We therefore have so far two types of degrees, but there are several more that are less well known.

Charles A. H. Franklyn claimed that there were seven types of degrees, but there are some issues with his list.<sup>17</sup>

My view is that there are (and were) six types of degrees, which I will call earned degrees, honorary degrees, incorporation degrees, official degrees, dignity degrees and prerogative degrees. I describe each of them in separate sections below, following which I explain ways in which individuals may be given some of the rights and privileges of a degree without actually being awarded a degree.

Current government legislation and university statutes tend to treat the different types of degree as if they were different degrees,<sup>18</sup> when historically they seem to have arisen as different routes to the same degree.<sup>19</sup> Originally, to be admitted to a degree you had to satisfy three requirements: residence (living and working in the university for a specified period), study (following a prescribed course) and exercises (such as disputations and examinations). Universities decided that in certain circumstances it was appropriate to grant dispensation to individuals from some or all of these requirements. I believe that different forms of dispensation from the requirements for a degree granted in different circumstances are the origins of the different types of degree.

How do universities and colleges acquire the power to award degrees? The oldest universities simply emerged.<sup>20</sup> Thereafter anyone who wished to create a new university or college with degree awarding powers, or to modify or increase the powers of an existing university or college, generally sought permission from whoever was regarded as the appro-

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<sup>17</sup> Franklyn, *Academical Dress*, p. 218.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992 section 48 and University of Hertfordshire Schedule of Awards, <[www.herts.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/232504/AS11-Schedule-of-Awards.pdf](http://www.herts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/232504/AS11-Schedule-of-Awards.pdf)>.

<sup>19</sup> Some universities make it clear that it is the same degree obtained by different routes. For example, as can be observed at graduation ceremonies, at Glasgow the form of words used by the Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor when conferring a degree is the same regardless of whether it is an earned or honorary degree, although the person presenting the candidate for the degree uses a different form of words for earned and honorary degrees.

<sup>20</sup> In Britain, this was the case with Oxford and Cambridge. L. W. B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 3–30, describes how Oxford and other universities emerged.

appropriate authority at the time: pope, king, emperor or government.<sup>21</sup> Nowadays governments (national, state or provincial), or government bodies, are the source of such powers.<sup>22</sup>

To prevent bogus universities and colleges from setting up, legislation in Britain now restricts the awarding of degrees to recognized universities and colleges.<sup>23</sup> That legislation also has provisions about types of degrees. When a new university or college is established and given the power to award earned degrees (which may or may not be restricted to specific levels of degree or subject areas) it is automatically also given the power to award honorary and official degrees.<sup>24</sup> Existing universities and colleges retain their existing powers (which may include awarding incorporation and dignity degrees),<sup>25</sup> and the Archbishop of Canterbury's power to award prerogative degrees (discussed in detail below) is explicitly preserved.<sup>26</sup>

In the past when a university or college has been given the power to award degrees, it has always been given that power in perpetuity. There have been some cases where a university or college has ceased to award degrees, but that has always been because it has closed or there has been a reorganization or amalgamation resulting in the power to award degrees being transferred to another university or college.<sup>27</sup> I am aware of no case where a university or college has had its power to award degrees suspended for a period or removed altogether. However, in England (but not in Scotland or Wales) there are now explicit provisions that enable such suspension or removal of powers, and also enable a university or college to be granted power to award degrees for only a fixed period of time.<sup>28</sup> I regard that as a disturbing development: it threatens to change the whole nature of universities from independent institutions with a long-term commitment to teaching and research to institutions focusing on short-term opportunities arising from the political needs of the government of the day.<sup>29</sup>

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21 In Britain and Ireland, St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen (King's College) were founded in the fifteenth century by Papal Bull. In the sixteenth century, after the Reformation when all connections with the pope were severed, Dublin and Edinburgh were founded by Royal Charter (but Marischal College and University of Aberdeen appears to have operated for a period under only a charter from the Earl Marischal).

22 In Britain, universities created before 1992 operate under the authority of Papal Bulls, Royal Charters and Acts of Parliament (primary legislation), while universities created since 1992 operate under Statutory Instruments (secondary legislation).

23 Education Reform Act 1988, section 214.

24 Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 43 (for England); Further and Higher Education Act 1992, section 76 (for Wales); Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, section 48 (for Scotland).

25 Education Reform Act 1988, section 214.

26 *Ibid.*; The Education (Recognised Bodies) (England) Order 2013; Higher Education and Research Act 2017, section 55.

27 For example, in 1908 the Royal University of Ireland was closed and replaced by the National University of Ireland and the Queen's University of Belfast.

28 Higher Education and Research Act 2017, sections 42 and 44.

29 A particularly disturbing example of the use of these powers is The Power to Award Degrees etc. (BPP University Ltd) Order of Council 2013 (Amendment) Order 2019 which extended BPP University's previous authorization to award degrees for a six-year period by one further year.

## Earned degrees

Earned degrees is the name I give to degrees obtained by studying and taking examinations (which may be written or oral, or take the form of scrutiny of a thesis that has been submitted).<sup>30</sup> They are the educational qualifications that students go to universities and colleges to obtain. Holders of earned degrees have the full rights and privileges described above. Holders of other types of degrees are granted more limited rights and privileges, unless their degree is described as being a ‘full’, ‘complete’ or ‘actual’ degree, in which case it carries with it the same rights and privileges as the corresponding earned degree.

Universities regularly exercise discretion and permit students to be admitted to earned degrees when they have not completely fulfilled the requirements, for example due to illness. The power to exercise this modern version of dispensation from requirements is often in the small print of degree regulations but is explicit in at least one university’s statutes.<sup>31</sup>

## Honorary degrees

Universities have long had the custom of recognizing the achievements of individuals and thanking them for their contributions to society by awarding them honorary degrees.<sup>32</sup>

Honorary degrees, also known as degrees *honoris causa*, are normally, but not always, Doctor degrees.

In some universities a wide range of Doctor degrees may be conferred as honorary degrees. In others it is only a restricted selection of Doctor degrees. A twentieth-century development was the creation of Doctor degrees, such as Doctor of the University, that are only conferred as honorary degrees and whose names are deliberately chosen to have no connection with any subject area. An honorary degree with a subject area name, such as Doctor of Laws, does not however imply that the recipient has any expertise in that area (though he or she may have). There are nevertheless some degrees which universities are reluctant to confer as honorary degrees because of the risk of implying that someone has a professional qualification that they do not have. One example in Britain is the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Current practice is that those universities that do confer it as an honorary degree only confer it on someone who is already a qualified medical practitioner.

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<sup>30</sup> I also count as an earned degree an MA from Oxford, Cambridge or Dublin awarded after the appropriate lapse of time to someone who has previously obtained an earned BA from those universities because, as explained above, the right to the MA stems from sitting and passing the BA examinations.

<sup>31</sup> *Dublin Statutes*, ‘Division – University’, section 3 (3) specifies that earned degrees may be awarded to students who have met all the requirements, students who have not met all the requirements due to illness, students who have died before the degree has been conferred and students who are deserving of a degree but have been prevented by other unforeseen circumstances from meeting all the requirements.

<sup>32</sup> According to L. H. Dudley Buxton and Strickland Gibson, *Oxford University Ceremonies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 87, the first Oxford degree that was definitely honorary was in 1695, with the phrase *honoris causa* making its first appearance in connection with honorary degrees in 1717. There are earlier uses of the phrase *honoris causa* in connection with degrees at Oxford, but these may have been what I call dignity degrees. Harvard considers that its first true honorary degree was the MA granted to Benjamin Franklin in 1753: <<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/hua/honorarydegrees>>.





**Fig. 1. Robert Simson MA, MD (1687–1768) from the frontispiece of his collected works *Opera Quaedam Reliqua*, posthumously published in 1776.**

Historically the holder of an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine did not have to be medically qualified. Figure 1 shows Robert Simson MA MD (1687–1768). Simson was Professor of Mathematics at Glasgow from 1711 to 1761. He is pictured wearing his Glasgow professor's gown. His MA was an earned degree from Glasgow. His MD was an honorary degree from St Andrews. Nowadays we would perhaps expect a mathematician to receive an honorary DSc rather than an MD, but science degrees were not instituted until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Some universities have the nice custom of awarding honorary Master of Arts degrees to members of staff who do not have a degree and have given long and valuable service to the university. Figure 2 is two Glasgow Masters of Arts photographed in 1993: on the left Inez McIntyre, whose MA is an earned degree and who is wearing an old-style MA hood; on the right Sheila Craik, whose MA is an honorary degree awarded for her service to the University Library and who is wearing the current style of MA hood.

The rights and privileges associated with an honorary degree are normally quite limited.<sup>33</sup> They always include the right to use the style and title of the degree, and to wear academic dress.<sup>34</sup> However, holders of honorary degrees often choose not to use the title, as they do not wish to create the impression that they have earned it by study and examination.

The academic dress for honorary degrees is usually, but not always, the same as for the corresponding earned degrees. Figure 3 shows professional golfers Tom Watson, Arnold Palmer and Pádraig Harrington who were awarded honorary LLD degrees by St Andrews in 2010. They are wearing the special black gowns with inbuilt cassock fronts prescribed for holders of honorary St Andrews degrees.

Another two British universities that have different academic dress for honorary degrees are Kingston and Northumbria. Kingston's academic dress is unusual in that only

<sup>33</sup> For example, there is generally no right to use library facilities or apply for other degrees. The wording used by Cambridge when conferring honorary degrees makes it clear that they are conferring the title of the degree and not a full degree: *Cambridge Statutes*, Ch. II, Forms of Admission to Degrees.

<sup>34</sup> In particular, holders of honorary Doctor degrees are entitled to use the title Dr, as stated in Patrick Montague-Smith (ed.), *Debrett's Correct Form*, revised edn (London: Headline Book Publishing, 1992), p. 266. The practice of universities also makes this clear. For example, T. R. Craig, who was Chancellor's Assessor (senior lay member of the University Court) at the University of Glasgow in the 1970s, and whose only degree was a Glasgow honorary LLD, was always addressed and referred to as Dr Craig within the University (personal recollection).

two hoods are prescribed—one for all earned degrees, the other for all honorary degrees. Northumbria has gowns and hoods for honorary degrees of different colours to the corresponding earned degrees.<sup>35</sup>

In a few universities, holders of honorary degrees are members of Convocation with the same voting rights as holders of earned degrees,<sup>36</sup> but that is not the norm.

### Incorporation degrees

There has always been movement of students and teachers between universities. A holder of an earned degree from one university often undertakes further study or becomes a member of staff at another university. When you move to a new university what rights and privileges would you expect to have? I suggest that nowadays you would expect your rights and privileges to derive from the course of study you are undertaking, or the post you hold, and not from whether you do or do not hold a degree from the university to which you have moved. That is the way most universities currently operate but that was not the case in the past, and there are some universities where it is still not the case. Instead, your rights and privileges stemmed from your academic status in the university to which you had moved, which was based mainly on the degrees you held from that university. Universities operating that system had to have methods of giving appropriate academic status to people arriving from other universities.



Author's collection

Fig. 2. Two Glasgow Masters of Arts.

There were (and are) three such methods. The first is incorporation degrees.<sup>37</sup> When someone with an earned degree from one university moved to another university, the university to which they moved incorporated their degree. This involved the university to which they had moved conferring on them the same degree (or the nearest equivalent) as they had originally received from their previous university. Such an incorporation degree, because it is the same degree (or nearest equivalent) as conferred by the previous university, is often called a degree *ad eundem* or *ad eundem gradum*.

The phrase *or nearest equivalent* is important because of differences in the degrees awarded by different universities.<sup>38</sup> For example, a Cambridge Doctor of Law<sup>39</sup> who incorporates at Oxford will become an Oxford Doctor of Civil Law. In the past, *nearest equivalent* has sometimes been liberally interpreted. There are examples of Oxford incorporating members of universities in France, Germany, Italy and Holland where the degree system was differ-

35 Nicholas Groves (ed.), *Shaw's Academical Dress of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3rd edn (London: Burgon Society, 2011), pp. 234, 309.

36 For example, holders of honorary degrees at St Andrews are members of the General Council (the St Andrews equivalent of Convocation): *Membership of the General Council*, <[www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/membership/](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/membership/)>.

37 The other two are official degrees, and the status of a degree (see later).

38 The word *equivalent* is, for example, to be found in *Cambridge Statutes*, Ch. II, 'Incorporation'.

39 The Cambridge Doctor of Law degree is of Law not Laws in spite of its official abbreviation being LLD, which suggests Laws: *Cambridge Statutes*, B II 1.



Reuters/Russell Cheyne – stock adobe.com

**Fig. 3. Professional golfers Tom Watson, Arnold Palmer and Padraig Harrington were awarded honorary LLD degrees by St Andrews in 2010.**



Malkalior/Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported

**Fig. 4. Professor Nasser Khalili in the dress of Chancellor's Court of Benefactors, Lord Patten (Chancellor of Oxford), and page boy in 2006.**

ent.<sup>40</sup> There are also examples of Oxford and Cambridge incorporating prerogative degrees (see below). Between 1905 and 1907 Dublin conferred incorporation degrees on over seven hundred women (colloquially referred to as the *Steamboat Ladies*) who had passed examinations at Oxford or Cambridge but had no degrees.<sup>41</sup> (At that time Oxford and Cambridge allowed women to sit the same examinations as men but would only confer degrees on men.)

In Britain and Ireland, incorporation was normal practice in the fifteenth century<sup>42</sup> but now only Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin are willing to incorporate degrees, only degrees from each other, and only in tightly specified circumstances.<sup>43</sup> A number of British

<sup>40</sup> *A History of Incorporation at Oxford*, Research Note, Oxford University Archives 2004, <[www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/incorporation](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/incorporation)>.

<sup>41</sup> *Steamboat Ladies* (act. 1904–07), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition). Their name derives from their arrival in Ireland from Britain by steamboat.

<sup>42</sup> For example, one of the first formal acts at Glasgow on its foundation in 1451 was to incorporate the members of staff of the Faculty of Arts: Cosmo Innes (ed.), *Munimenta Alme Universitatis Glasguensis: The Records of the University of Glasgow from its Foundation till 1727* (Glasgow: Maitland Club, 1854). Vol. II, p. 55.

<sup>43</sup> Oxford's statutes permit members of staff and students to incorporate a group of degrees (but it appears from personal observation that the University and colleges place restrictions on which

universities founded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have the power to award incorporation degrees, but there is little evidence of them using that power.<sup>44</sup> Current practice in Britain is not to give that power to new universities although, as remarked above, they are given the power to award official degrees.

Elsewhere in the world there are examples of universities that award or used to award incorporation degrees.<sup>45</sup>

Incorporation degrees are full degrees with the same rights, privileges and academic dress as earned degrees, except that a change to Oxford's statutes in 2002 reduced their rights: if you are a member of staff at Oxford with an incorporation degree but no earned Oxford degree and resign (rather than retire) from your post, you cease to be a member of Convocation, when previously you would have retained membership for life.<sup>46</sup>

## Official degrees

An official degree is a degree that is conferred on a member of staff or holder of some other post or office within a university or college. Official degrees, also known as degrees *jure officii* or degrees *de jure*,<sup>47</sup> are normally Bachelor or Master.

Like incorporation degrees, official degrees may be used by a university as a method of giving a member of staff who does not have a degree from that university the same academic status, rights and privileges as members of staff who already have such a degree. The difference is that, unlike incorporation degrees, official degrees do not take into account any other degrees that the member of staff may have. Instead official degrees are designed simply to give sufficient academic status, which is why they are normally Bachelor or Master.

This system operates at Oxford, Cambridge, and Dublin in relation to most college posts and many university posts. If a person appointed to such a post does not already have an appropriate degree from the university (either an earned degree or an incorporation

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students with Bachelor degrees are permitted to incorporate); Cambridge permits only members of staff to incorporate and only their highest degree; Dublin permits members of staff and students to incorporate, but will not confer any incorporation degree higher than MA and charges a high fee: €1,204 for a Bachelor degree: Oxford Statutes, Regulations for Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates 1.7 to 1.9; *Cambridge Statutes*, Ch. II, Incorporation; Dublin Statutes Division – University Section 3(4) and *Trinity College Dublin Calendar 2019–20*, Section P, Regulation 11, <[www.tcd.ie/calendar/](http://www.tcd.ie/calendar/)>.

44 For example, Bristol: *Charter of Incorporation* section 3(2), <[www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/university/documents/governance/PART%201%20-%20Charter%20of%20Incorporation.pdf](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/university/documents/governance/PART%201%20-%20Charter%20of%20Incorporation.pdf)>. In trying to identify examples of incorporation degrees it is necessary to remember that it is possible for a person to obtain two identical earned degrees from different universities, a most unusual case being Professor Douglas M. G. Lloyd, who obtained an earned DSc from St Andrews in 1971 and also from Bristol in 1972.

45 For example, Sydney awards incorporation degrees on retiring members of staff to enable them to retain a connection with the University as alumni, and Harvard used to award such degrees: *Degrees conferred ad eundem gradum, University of Sydney*, <<https://sydney.edu.au/policies/showdoc.aspx?recnum=PDOC2011/55&RendNum=0>>; *Honorary Degrees at Harvard*, Harvard University Archives Research Notes, <<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/hua/honorarydegrees>>.

46 *Oxford Statutes*, Statute III section 2.

47 *Jure* may also be spelt *iure*. In Oxford official degrees are referred to as *degrees by resolution* (formerly *degrees by special resolution* and *degrees by decree*); in Cambridge they are *degrees under Statute B II 2*.

degree) they become entitled to receive an official Master of Arts degree. Other examples of universities that operate such a system are Harvard and Yale.<sup>48</sup>

Operating such a system can have a noticeable effect at university ceremonies. In most universities, ceremonies are occasions where the rich variety of colours and designs of academic dress worn by members of staff displays the wide range of qualifications from different universities held by the staff. However, at a university where the system of conferring official degrees is in place, the academic dress of that university may predominate. At certain ceremonies in Oxford members of staff are still prohibited from wearing the academic dress of another university if they have an Oxford degree.<sup>49</sup> This, together with the number of official Master of Arts degrees conferred, results in a sea of MA gowns and hoods in Oxford ceremonies.<sup>50</sup>

Universities which do not operate such a system may nevertheless still occasionally confer an official degree on a newly appointed member of staff. The usual reason for doing this is if the member of staff does not already hold any degree from any university (and therefore does not already have any academic dress to wear at formal ceremonies).<sup>51</sup> The expansion of the higher education system worldwide in recent years has meant that this situation now rarely occurs.

Official degrees at Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin are full degrees with the same rights, privileges and academic dress as earned degrees, except that the previously mentioned change to Oxford's statutes in 2002 that reduced the rights of holders of incorporation degrees also reduced in the same way the rights of holders of official degrees.

Elsewhere the rights and privileges associated with official degrees tend to be very limited and similar to those of honorary degrees.

I sense in recent years a declining attitude towards official and incorporation degrees. There seems to be an increasing tendency to omit them from lists of degrees in individuals' CVs and official lists.<sup>52</sup>

## Dignity degrees

Dignity degrees are degrees conferred on holders of high offices (such as heads of state, royalty, archbishops, bishops, judges and chancellors of universities) and other persons, as a mark of recognition and respect for the position they have attained.

<sup>48</sup> The Harvard official Master of Arts degree (AM) is conferred *ut in grege nostro numeretur* (so that they may be counted among our flock); the official degree at Yale is named the Honorary Master of Arts (MAH) and referred to as the private Yale degree: <<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/hua/honorarydegrees>> and <<https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/2883-the-private-yale-degree>>.

<sup>49</sup> *Oxford Statutes*, Regulations relating to Academic Dress, Regulation 3, <[www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/48-012.shtml](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/48-012.shtml)>.

<sup>50</sup> Another factor is that, in Oxford, MA ranks higher than DPhil so that holders of both MA and DPhil tend to wear MA academic dress, which also costs much less than DPhil academic dress.

<sup>51</sup> One example was Oddveig Rosegg, lecturer in Norwegian at Glasgow from 1959 to 1980. She received an official MA because the different system at Norwegian universities meant that she was a Candidate in Philosophy, a status for which the equivalent of a good honours degree was required, but she had no degree.

<sup>52</sup> In *Oxford University Calendar 2016–17* the entries for members of staff appointed before the changes to the Statutes in 2002 always include official and incorporation degrees (for example, Laurence Brockliss, Fellow of Magdalen is listed as MA PhD Cambridge, MA DPhil Oxford—his Cambridge degrees being earned and his Oxford ones incorporation) but entries for staff appointed after 2002 apparently often do not.

Dignity degrees are sometimes referred to as degrees *jure dignitatis*. In Oxford they are called *degrees by diploma*. They are a greater honour than honorary degrees, and differ from honorary degrees in that they are full degrees with the same rights and privileges as earned degrees.<sup>53</sup> Being full degrees, dignity degrees have the same academic dress as the corresponding earned degrees. They differ from official degrees in that the recipients are not members of staff.

The differences between dignity degrees, honorary degrees and official degrees can now be clearly identified, but historically these three types of degree emerged from a single type of degree sometimes referred to as *degrees by creation*, that is degrees conferred on persons who did not have the corresponding earned degree.<sup>54</sup> In the case of degrees awarded before about 1800 it can be difficult to identify to which of the three types they belong and careful study of documentary evidence is necessary. Care is also needed because modern authors and official sources often use the term honorary degree loosely to mean any of these three types.<sup>55</sup>

Dignity degrees could be Master degrees. A famous example is Samuel Johnson who received a Master of Arts degree from Oxford as a dignity degree in 1755 when his Dictionary of the English Language was about to be published.<sup>56</sup>

In the nineteenth century the practice of conferring dignity Doctor degrees on holders of high offices seems to have been quite extensive. It continued until the early twentieth century after which it virtually disappeared. Universities generally become more selective in deciding which holders of high offices should receive degrees, and preferred to confer honorary degrees on them rather than dignity degrees.<sup>57</sup> There is however one exception: Oxford.<sup>58</sup> Oxford still confers dignity degrees on royalty, heads of state and its own chancellors.<sup>59</sup>

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53 Oxford has recently found it difficult to explain to the media and the public that degrees by diploma are a greater honour than honorary degrees and has started using the unfortunate phrase *honorary degree by diploma* to describe them in press releases and on webpages, such as the Statement on the Sultan of Brunei's Honorary Degree, issued on 6 April 2019: <[www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-04-06-statement-sultan-brunei-honorary-degree](http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-04-06-statement-sultan-brunei-honorary-degree)>.

54 Buxton and Gibson, p. 84.

55 See notes 48 and 53 for Yale and Oxford examples of that. *Honorary Degrees: Origin and Early History*, Research Note, Oxford University Archives, 2017, <[www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/honorary-degrees](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/honorary-degrees)>, uses the term honorary degree in that loose sense, which causes it to appear to contradict Buxton and Gibson to which it refers.

56 The Latin wording of the diploma makes it clear that the degree conferred by the diploma is a degree with full rights and privileges (and therefore a dignity degree rather than an honorary degree, which would have restricted rights and privileges): <[www.bl.uk/collection-items/samuel-johnsons-ma-diploma-1755](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/samuel-johnsons-ma-diploma-1755)>.

57 Buxton and Gibson writing in 1935 describe the practice of conferring dignity degrees on bishops as 'usual until quite recently' (p. 86) and cite as an isolated late example of that practice William Wand, Dean of Oriel College Oxford, who was awarded a dignity DD in 1934 on his appointment as Archbishop of Brisbane in Australia. In 1933 the Archbishop of Canterbury also described that practice as having been recently abolished: *House of Lords Official Papers* (5th series), 87 (1933), col. 840.

58 The *Dublin Statutes* still provide for dignity degrees: see Division – University, Section 3 (4) (d); but 'these seem to have been forgotten in recent years': 'Old Trinity, A 90-degree University', *Trinity News*, 23 March 2010, <<http://trinitynews.ie/2010/03/old-trinity-a-90-degree-university/>>.

59 The *Oxford University Calendar 2016-17* lists eighteen living holders of dignity degrees.

Figure 4 shows (centre) Lord Patten wearing his gown of office as the Chancellor of Oxford, with (right) a page boy to carry the train of his gown. When Lord Patten was installed as Chancellor a dignity degree was conferred upon him, namely the degree of Doctor of Civil Law by diploma. Professor Khalili (left) is wearing the gown and bonnet of a member of the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors.

## Prerogative degrees

By prerogative degrees I mean degrees awarded by, or on the direct instructions of, a senior person with prerogative powers such as a pope, king, emperor or archbishop who is not part of a university or college. These include the degrees known as Lambeth Degrees that are awarded by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

A little English legal history is needed in order to understand these degrees. Laws, rules and regulations often impose requirements or restrictions on individuals. However, special circumstances can arise when it is necessary to allow exceptions. Historically this was done by granting individuals a dispensation from a requirement or a licence to do something that would not otherwise be permissible. As universities developed it became the practice to require the clergy to have appropriate university degrees for certain senior positions such as bishop or dean of a cathedral, but that in turn created the need for a dispensation or licence if an otherwise suitable candidate for a position did not possess the necessary degree.

Before the Reformation, the pope was head of the church, and also the person who granted authority for the creation of universities and their right to award degrees. He therefore was naturally the person to grant such dispensations and licences. In England at the Reformation all connections with the pope were severed. The king took over the pope's powers. He became Supreme Head (later Supreme Governor) of the Church of England. He also became the person who issued charters for universities and colleges. His power to issue a wide range of dispensations and licences was delegated to the Archbishop of Canterbury by the Ecclesiastical Licences Act 1533. One has however to remember the maxim that 'delegated power is power retained' because the person delegating a power may sometimes continue concurrently to exercise the power himself, and has the ability to cancel the delegation. The wording of the Ecclesiastical Licences Act makes it very clear that the powers are only being delegated to the archbishop and not given to him absolutely. It also put in place various mechanisms for the king to monitor the exercise of these powers.

Another feature of such powers is that it was customary for the pope and the king sometimes not to exercise the powers personally but instead to commission other persons (for example, papal legates) to exercise them on their behalf on particular occasions, for particular periods of time or in specific geographic locations. The Ecclesiastical Licences Act similarly permitted the archbishop to commission others to exercise his powers. (We

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The University of Oxford's Standing Orders of Council for 2017-18 state (Annex E, paragraph 14) that 'When a degree is conferred upon a royal personage or upon the head of a foreign state it shall be by diploma' [a dignity degree]: <[www.council.ox.ac.uk/::ognode-117646::/files/2017-18councilstandingorderspdf](http://www.council.ox.ac.uk/::ognode-117646::/files/2017-18councilstandingorderspdf)>. The conferring of a dignity degree is also part of the ceremony for the installation of a newly elected chancellor. The change to Oxford's statutes in 2002 which curtailed the rights of holders of incorporation and official degrees to membership of Convocation also curtailed the rights of holders of dignity degrees.

need to appreciate that transport and communication difficulties at that time in history made extensive powers to delegate and commission a practical necessity.)<sup>60</sup>

A person seeking a dispensation or licence could apply for it—which could be very expensive—but equally the pope, king, emperor or archbishop could grant one on his own initiative or following a nomination or recommendation from another person.

It appears that, at some point, a pope decided that the most appropriate way to grant a dispensation or licence to a person without a degree was to confer a degree on them. Thus prerogative degrees came into being that had not been awarded by any university. Prerogative degrees, like all other dispensations and licences, could be directly conferred by the pope, or conferred by someone else who had been commissioned to do that.

After the Reformation, this was interpreted as giving the king, and under the Ecclesiastical Licences Act the Archbishop of Canterbury, the right to confer (or commission someone else to confer) prerogative degrees on application from individuals, on his own initiative, or on nomination or recommendation by another person.

A further complication is that it appears that sometimes the commission to confer a degree was issued to a university, the effect of which is that the resulting degree is a dignity degree conferred by the university rather than a prerogative degree.<sup>61</sup> It is also almost impossible to distinguish a formal commission to a university to confer a degree from a strong recommendation to the university to use its own powers.<sup>62</sup>

The intention was clearly that prerogative degrees were to have equal legal status to degrees awarded by universities. They were to be full degrees and not honorary degrees.<sup>63</sup> Oxford and Cambridge reluctantly accepted the validity of these degrees by allowing some holders of them to incorporate them.<sup>64</sup> There was however a major court case in 1717–25

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60 Universities also sometimes commissioned someone to confer a degree at a distance from the university. Degrees conferred by someone acting under a commission are sometimes called *degrees by mandamus*.

61 William Gibson, Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Oxford Brookes University, has informed me that he and other scholars consider it likely that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Archbishop of Canterbury sometimes commissioned Oxford and Cambridge to confer degrees (as well as conferring Lambeth degrees himself), and that in the same period the Archbishop of Armagh may have had similar powers in Ireland to commission degrees and commissioned Dublin to confer the degrees, but that hard evidence to support that has been elusive (personal communication, 21 Sept. 2019).

62 An interesting example is that from November 1642 to February 1643 Oxford was prevailed upon by King Charles I to confer degrees on about 350 people. Oxford subsequently presented a petition to the king that this was damaging its reputation and finances and asked the king only to present for degrees people who were qualified and would pay the fees. The king agreed. See *Honorary Degrees: Origin and Early History*. Care is needed in interpreting that reference because it uses the term honorary degrees in the loose sense of including dignity degrees, as remarked in note 55.

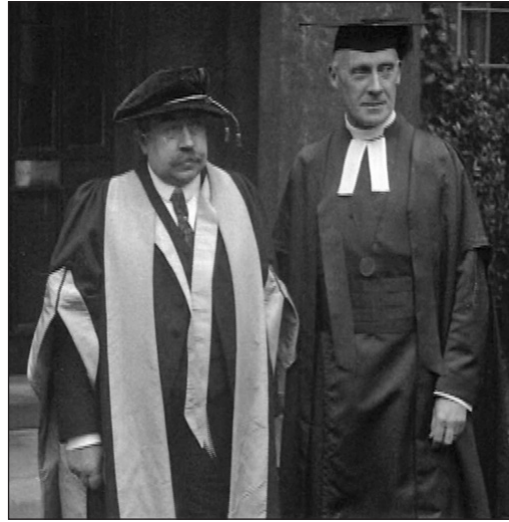
63 The instruments conferring the degrees use phrases such as ‘we create you an actual Doctor of Divinity’ and sometimes indicate that the degree is conferred *jure dignitatis*: Franklyn, *Academical Dress*, pp. 228–30; Noel Cox, ‘Lambeth Degree Academical Dress’, *TBS*, 5 (2005), pp. 64–75 (p. 65); both reprinted in William Gibson (ed.), *The History of Lambeth Degrees: Sources and Studies* (London: Burgon Society, 2019).

64 Cambridge when allowing an individual to incorporate often stated that it was not to be regarded as a precedent (see Noel Cox, ‘Dispensations, Privileges and the Conferment of Graduate Status: With Special Reference to Lambeth Degrees’, *Journal of Law and Religion*, 18.1 (2002–03), pp. 249–74 (p. 267); reprinted in William Gibson, *History*).





By John Faber Jr after Hamlet Winstanley, © National Portrait Gallery, London



Still from news film 706.21 by British Pathé

**Fig.6. Paul Painlevé and the Revd George Weekes, University of Cambridge, 21 November 1927.**

**Fig. 5 (left). Samuel Peploe (1667–1752).**

when Francis Gastrell, Bishop of Chester challenged their validity, and in particular the validity of the Lambeth degree held by Samuel Peploe, who is depicted in Figure 5.

In the case of Gastrell and Peploe the High Court ruled that Lambeth degrees have equal legal status to degrees awarded by universities.<sup>65</sup>

As mentioned earlier, recent British legislation on the awarding of degrees specifically preserves the Archbishop of Canterbury's right to award degrees.

The Archbishop of Canterbury's custom of prescribing either Oxford or Cambridge academic dress for Lambeth degrees has been the subject of much analysis.<sup>66</sup>

Prerogative degrees were originally designed to cover the situation where people had not obtained degrees through the usual route of study and examination at a university or college. Archbishops of Canterbury would wish to satisfy themselves that the proposed recipient of a prerogative degree was worthy to receive it, particularly in the case of someone who had applied to them for the degree. Thus Archbishops started seeking evidence, which slowly drew them into setting examinations for some of the degrees they awarded.<sup>67</sup>

The Archbishop of Canterbury now runs an education scheme known as the Archbishop's Examination in Theology. Successful participants are awarded MPhil or PhD de-

<sup>65</sup> William Gibson, *History*, pp. 7–62.

<sup>66</sup> See Cox, 'Lambeth Academical Dress'; Graham Zellick, 'Lambeth Academic Dress and the University of London', *TBS*, 7 (2007), pp. 39–47 (also reprinted in William Gibson, *History*); and Groves, p. 237.

<sup>67</sup> See Archbishop Lang's statement in House of Lords Official Papers (5th series), 87 (1933), cols 832–49, and the analysis in Cox 'Dispensations', pp. 271–72, and Cox, 'Lambeth Academical Dress', pp. 65–66.

degrees by him. The present Archbishop appears to be uncomfortable about awarding degrees on the basis of nomination by others, and has issued a statement to the effect that he retains the right to award such degrees but is not currently accepting nominations.<sup>68</sup>

The current position is therefore almost the reverse of the original situation where recipients of a prerogative degree had not followed the usual route of study and examination. Instead the Archbishop is becoming increasingly like a university. He has even become regulated by a government body.<sup>69</sup> He is now living out the statement 'I am a one-man university' made by Archbishop Lang in 1933.<sup>70</sup>

### **Rights and privileges granted without a degree: qualifications and academic dress**

Academic dress, as we know it today, is largely a formalized development of certain items of clothing that clergymen and laymen customarily wore in past times. It developed over the centuries into specific forms of dress worn by students, holders of degrees, members of staff of universities and senior university officers such as chancellors. Until the middle of the nineteenth century it developed largely through custom and practice, although there are some examples of regulations being made and specific decisions being taken on the designs of gowns and hoods.<sup>71</sup> Academic dress regulations, of the type we are used to today, developed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

Until the middle of the twentieth century these regulations specified academic dress for most people involved in the academic life of a university, but with a notable exception. There was rarely any provision for people who had received qualifications that were not degrees, such as licentiateships, certificates and diplomas.<sup>72</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century this began to change, partly because many professional bodies and other institutions outside the university sector had specified gowns and/or hoods for wear by holders of qualifications, accreditations, fellowships and memberships awarded by them, which caused holders of licentiateships, certificates and diplomas to complain that they were the only group not to have gowns or hoods for formal occasions. Thus increasingly universities are prescribing academic dress for holders of licentiateships, certificates and diplomas.<sup>73</sup>

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68 See <[www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/about-archbishop/public-life/archbishops-awards-and-examinations](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/about-archbishop/public-life/archbishops-awards-and-examinations)>.

69 Section 55 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, while preserving the Archbishop's right to grant degrees under the Ecclesiastical Licences Act 1533, nevertheless brings degrees awarded by him on the basis of a course of study, supervised research or any form of assessment under the regulation of the Office for Students.

70 *House of Lords Official Papers* (5th series), 87 (1933), col. 838.

71 For example, Oxford's 1636 Statutes required specimens of approved designs to be made (but there is doubt as to whether that happened), and in 1695 instructions were issued to the Scottish universities that staff were to wear black gowns, and students red gowns: John Venables, *Academic Dress of the University of Oxford*, 9th edn (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2009), p. 2; Innes, Vol. II, pp. 516–17, 523.

72 In Britain, and countries following British practice, licentiateships are not degrees.

73 In some universities the academic dress for non-degree qualifications is a gown and hood of similar style to degrees but in other cases there is a distinctive form of dress. The Licentiate in Dental Surgery (LDS) formerly awarded at St Andrews has a special style of gown. In Ireland—and also formerly in Scotland (LTh Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow and LLA St Andrews)—an epitoge is specified instead of a hood. Scarves or stoles are also sometimes used instead of hoods. See Groves, pp. 16–17.

Holders of licentiateships, certificates and diplomas are however not usually given any of the other rights of holders of degrees, although there is at least one example where holders of licentiateships are members of Convocation with the same rights as holders of degrees.<sup>74</sup>

The academic dress regulations of some universities have an interesting provision regarding members of staff: any member of staff who holds a degree from another university, as an alternative to wearing the academic dress of that degree, may wear the academic dress of the same or nearest equivalent degree of the university that employs them.<sup>75</sup> On one level, this could be regarded as a purely pragmatic decision: in any university, academic dress of that university is more easily obtainable than the academic dress of another university. It also eliminates the unsatisfactory practice sometimes observed where members of staff who do not own their own academic dress borrow from a colleague academic dress to which they are not entitled. On another deeper level, it is a modern manifestation of the ancient practice of incorporation of degrees.

A recent development at universities relates to benefactors. In order to encourage donations from individuals, universities often offer inducements such as membership of donor groups and invitations to special events. In certain cases the right to wear a special gown is included. Such gowns are controversial: some people are uncomfortable with the concept that a large donation to a university secures the right to wear a gown that might be mistaken for a gown denoting a degree.

Some of these gowns are deliberately designed to resemble the gowns of Doctor degrees, for example the gown of members of the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors at Oxford, shown in Figure 4.<sup>76</sup> It is noticeable that in all cases no hood is provided. It seems to be accepted currently that hoods are an indication of a degree or academic qualification.

## **Rights and privileges granted without a degree: title, status and academic dress**

There are a few situations where universities may grant individuals the title or status of a degree without actually awarding the degree.

One historical example was at Cambridge. It was the last of the British universities to decide to award degrees to women. That was in 1948. Between 1923 and 1948 it operated a sort of halfway house. Women sat the same examinations as men, the men received degrees, but the women received only the title of the degrees. Women therefore could use the

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<sup>74</sup> Holders of the LDS at St Andrews are members of the General Council, the St Andrews equivalent of Convocation: *Membership of the General Council*, <[www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/membership/](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/governance/general-council/membership/)>.

<sup>75</sup> A British example is Hertfordshire: *Academic Dress Regulations*, Regulation 2.2, <[www.herts.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/230540/AS01-Academic-Dress.pdf](http://www.herts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/230540/AS01-Academic-Dress.pdf)>; see also Bruce Christianson, *Academic Dress in the University of Hertfordshire*, 2nd edn (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire, 2006), p. 26. In America, the 1895 Intercollegiate Code of Academic Costume contained that provision, and it was specifically adopted by Princeton, but later editions of the Academic Costume Code dropped it and one edition went so far as to criticize such a provision: see Stephen L. Wolgast, 'The Intercollegiate Code of Academic Costume: An Introduction', *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 9–37 (p. 26); Donald L. Drakeman, 'Peculiar Habits: Academic Costumes at Princeton University', *TBS*, 9 (2009), pp. 59–79 (p. 66).

<sup>76</sup> This gown and bonnet are of the same general design as Oxford Doctor gowns and bonnets but have different materials, colour and ornamentations.

style and title of the degrees but had none of the other rights and privileges that the men enjoyed and were not permitted to wear academic dress.<sup>77</sup>

Cambridge is however also the location of another example whose intention is to ensure fairness and equity of treatment. When a student who has obtained a degree from another university is undertaking further study at Cambridge, he or she is granted BA status or MA status (depending on his or her age). The rights that go with that are designed to parallel the rights of students who have already obtained a Cambridge degree and are undertaking further study there: they will normally have a BA or MA degree depending on their age. BA or MA status ceases when the student completes their studies. MA status can also be awarded to distinguished visitors and members of staff who do not have a Cambridge degree and are not eligible (or not yet eligible) for an official MA.<sup>78</sup>

Holders of BA status and MA status at Cambridge are not entitled to wear the academic dress of a BA or MA. Instead BA status and MA status gowns are prescribed, which are the same design as BA and MA gowns except that the strings (wide strips of material fastened behind the tops of the facings and hanging down to waist level) have been removed. Strings are a feature of most Cambridge gowns but are inside the gowns and not normally visible when gowns are worn. The design of the BA status and MA status gowns is therefore quite extraordinary because it is normally impossible to tell whether someone is wearing one of these gowns or a BA or MA gown.

Figure 6 is a rare image from 1927 showing Cambridge gown strings. On the left is Paul Painlevé (Mathematician and French War Minister) who had just received an honorary ScD degree. On the right is the Revd George Weekes MA (Vice-Chancellor and Master of Sidney Sussex College). Both of them are wearing their gowns in such a way that the strings are visible.

Oxford also used to have the practice of granting individuals the status of a degree.

In the nineteenth century, in parallel with the formal incorporation of degrees, Oxford had a more informal granting of status confusingly called admission *ad eundem* (or in the 1860s admission *comitatis causa*) about which little information seems to have survived.<sup>79</sup>

For part of the twentieth century Oxford awarded MA status, and with it some of the rights and privileges of an MA, to distinguished visitors and the holders of certain university posts who did not have an MA and were not eligible to receive an official MA. MA status gave these holders of university posts membership of Congregation, the university's governing body, to which they would otherwise not have been entitled. MA status ceased to be awarded in 2000 at the same time as the statutes were changed to make membership of Congregation dependent solely on the post held. It appears that holders of MA status had the right to wear an MA gown.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the first admission of women to degrees of the University, *Cambridge University Reporter*, 22 July 1998, <[www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/1997-98/weekly/5745/20.html](http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/1997-98/weekly/5745/20.html)>.

<sup>78</sup> *Cambridge Statutes*, Chapter II, Status of Bachelor of Arts and Status of Master of Arts.

<sup>79</sup> *A History of Incorporation at Oxford*, Research Note, Oxford University Archives 2004, <[www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/incorporation](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/oua/enquiries/incorporation)>. See also *The Works of the Rev. Daniel Waterland, DD*, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1836): admission *ad eundem* is mentioned in a footnote in Vol. 1, p. 20; there is also mention of a degree by mandamus in Vol. 1, p. 9, which may be a reference to a Lambeth degree (see note 60).

<sup>80</sup> *MA Status*, Research Note, Oxford University Archives, 2016, <[www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk](http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk)

## Letters after your name

As mentioned previously, if you have a degree, you have the right to put letters after your name that are an abbreviation of the degree. These are usually referred to as post-nominal letters or postnominals. Sometimes people ask what are the rules for them, especially if you have more than one degree. However, there are not actually any rules as such. Debrett's Correct Form attempted to record and guide current practice in Britain, and editors of publications sometimes publish their own style guide.<sup>81</sup> I give here a brief summary of what seems to be customary and regarded as best practice.

Universities prescribe abbreviations for their degrees. For example, Cambridge and Oxford prescribe PhD and DPhil for Doctor of Philosophy respectively. An abbreviation of the name of the university is often added (for example, MA Oxford).<sup>82</sup> The Latin abbreviations Oxon, Cantab and Dunelm were once commonly used for Oxford, Cambridge and Durham and are still occasionally found.

Abbreviations of degrees sometimes include additional details in brackets. For example, some universities offer a Bachelor of Science degree in Medical Science, whose official abbreviation is BSc (Med Sc). It is considered good practice to include additional details in brackets if they are part of the official abbreviation but not otherwise. It is rare for a degree obtained with honours to have (Hons) as part of its official abbreviation.<sup>83</sup>

Honorary degrees and other types of degrees normally share the same abbreviations as the corresponding earned degrees. However, an honorary degree is sometimes indicated by placing Hon before the official abbreviation of the degree, or hc (for *honoris causa*) after it,<sup>84</sup> and there are cases where Hon or hc is part of the official abbreviation of the degree.<sup>85</sup>

When you have more than one degree the custom is to list them in ascending order (Bachelor then Master then Doctor)<sup>86</sup> or in the order in which you received them.<sup>87</sup> If you /\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0008/199664/MA-Status.pdf>. It contains a reference to the right of holders of MA status to wear an MA gown but that was not included in the academic dress regulations and W. B. Stewart recalls an 'unseemly row' at one point over what academic dress they were entitled to wear. (Personal communication from W. B. Stewart MA (St Andrews), MA, DPhil (Oxford), Emeritus Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. His Oxford MA is an official degree; his other two degrees are earned.)

81 The edition of *Debrett's Correct Form* which I have consulted is Patrick Montague-Smith (ed.) (1992). An example of a style guide is *Oxford University Calendar*, 'Notes on Style', <[https://gazette.web.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/gazette/documents/media/calendar\\_style\\_guide\\_2018.pdf](https://gazette.web.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/gazette/documents/media/calendar_style_guide_2018.pdf)>.

82 Current practice is to use much less punctuation than was formerly the case. For example, current practice is to write MA PhD Edinburgh rather than M.A., Ph.D. (Edinburgh). Note that LLB used to be punctuated LL.B. because the LL is an abbreviation for Laws.

83 Salford is one university where (Hons) is part of the abbreviation: see *University of Salford Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes 2019-20*, Section 2.1.4, Table A, <[www.salford.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/1912507/AcademicRegulationsTaught201920.pdf](http://www.salford.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1912507/AcademicRegulationsTaught201920.pdf)>.

84 For example, Oxford practice is to insert Hon before the abbreviation and Dublin practice is to insert hc after the abbreviation.

85 For example, Hon DLitt Hertfordshire; see <[www.herts.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/232504/AS11-Schedule-of-Awards.pdf](http://www.herts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/232504/AS11-Schedule-of-Awards.pdf)> and Dr hc Edinburgh; see <[www.ed.ac.uk/student-administration/graduations/honorary/degree-procedure](http://www.ed.ac.uk/student-administration/graduations/honorary/degree-procedure)>.

86 Cambridge practice used to be to list degrees in descending order: see Patrick Montague-Smith, p. 271. However, since at least 1999 it has adopted ascending order: <[www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/1999-2000/special/04/](http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/1999-2000/special/04/)>.

87 This was common practice with Bachelor degrees for which an Arts degree was a prerequi-

have degrees at different levels in the same subject area, such as BSc and DSc, the lower one is often omitted, unless you wish to point out that they are from different universities or are providing a full list of your qualifications.<sup>88</sup> People with more than one degree sometimes choose to list only their more senior degree or degrees, especially if one of their more junior degrees was a prerequisite for one of their more senior degrees.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

Bachelor, Master and Doctor degrees have been conferred by British universities for at least six centuries and bring with them rights and privileges, including the right to wear academic dress. Over time six different types of degree developed. All of these types are still being conferred but several of them are in decline. It seems likely that in the future only two types will remain. These are the two most readily identifiable types: earned degrees obtained through study and examination, and honorary degrees.

## References to web pages

The footnotes in this article contain numerous references to web pages. These pages were all accessed and verified in October 2019 but their continued accessibility cannot of course be guaranteed.

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site. In that case the Arts degree would be placed first, for example MA BLitt.

<sup>88</sup> Sometimes the higher degree is placed where the lower degree was so that, for example, a BSc PhD who received a DSc would be listed as DSc PhD rather than PhD DSc and likewise an MB ChB who received an MD would be listed as MD ChB.

<sup>89</sup> In Oxford it was customary to omit other degrees if a person held a DD or DCL. In Scotland until the 1960s the LLB degree had MA as a prerequisite and lawyers tended to list their qualifications as simply LLB rather than MA LLB.