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degree, also called academic degree, in [education](#), any of several titles conferred by colleges and universities to indicate the completion of a [course of study](#) or the extent of academic achievement.

The hierarchy of degrees dates back to the universities of 13th-century Europe, which had faculties organized into [guilds](#). Members of the faculties were licensed to teach, and degrees were in effect the professional certifications that they had attained the [guild](#) status of a “master.” There was originally only one degree in European [higher education](#), that of [master](#) or [doctor](#). The baccalaureate, or [bachelor](#)’s degree, was originally simply a stage toward mastership and was awarded to a candidate who had studied the prescribed texts in the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) for three or four years and had successfully passed examinations held by his [masters](#). The holder of the [bachelor](#)’s degree had thus completed the first stage of academic life and was enabled to proceed with a course of study for the degree of master or doctor. After completing those studies, he was examined by the chancellor’s board and by the faculty and, if successful, received a master’s or doctor’s degree, which admitted him into the teachers’ guild and was a certificate of fitness to teach at any [university](#).

The terms master, doctor, and professor were all equivalent. The degree of doctor of civil [law](#) was first awarded at the [University of Bologna](#) in the second half of the 12th century, and similar degrees came to be awarded in [canon law](#), [medicine](#), [grammar](#), logic, and philosophy. At the [University of Paris](#), however, the term “master” was more commonly used, and the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge adopted the Parisian system. In many universities, the certified scholar in the faculties of arts or grammar was called a master, whereas in the faculties of philosophy, [theology](#), medicine, and law he was called a doctor. Perhaps because it was necessary to become a master of arts before proceeding to the other studies, the doctorate came to be esteemed as the higher title. (The common Anglo-American degrees “master of arts” and “doctor of philosophy” stem from this usage.) In German universities, the titles master and doctor were

also at first interchangeable, but the term doctor soon came to be applied to advanced degrees in all faculties, and the German usage was eventually adopted throughout the world.

In the **United States** and **Great Britain**, the modern gradation of academic degrees is usually bachelor (or baccalaureate), master, and doctor. The bachelor's degree marks the completion of undergraduate study, usually amounting to four years. The **master's degree** involves one to two years' additional study, while the doctorate usually involves a lengthier period of work. British and American universities customarily grant the bachelor's as the **first degree** in arts or sciences. After one or two more years of coursework, the second degree, M.A. or M.S., may be obtained by **examination** or the completion of a piece of research. At the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, holders of a B.A. can receive an M.A. six or seven years after entering the university simply by paying certain fees. The degree of doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) is usually offered by all universities that admit advanced students and is granted after prolonged study and either examination or original research. A relatively new degree in the **United States** is that of **associate**, which is awarded by junior or community colleges after a two-year course of study; it has a relatively low status.

The rapid expansion of specialization produced a growing variety of specific academic degrees in American, British, and other English-speaking **higher education** systems in the 20th century. More than 1,500 different degrees are now awarded in the **United States**, for example, with the largest number in science, **technology**, **engineering**, medicine, and education. The commonest degrees, however, are still the B.A. and the B.S., to which the signature of a special field may be added (*e.g.*, B.S.Pharm., or **Bachelor of Science** in Pharmacy). These special fields have their corresponding designations at the graduate levels.

With some exceptions, intermediate degrees, such as those of bachelor and master, have been abandoned in the universities of continental Europe. In the second half of the 20th century, the **French** degree system was undergoing change as part of a major university reform. The *baccalauréat* is conferred upon French students who have successfully completed secondary studies and admits the student to the university. Students who obtain the *licence*, which is awarded after three or four years of university study, are qualified to teach in secondary schools or to go on to higher-level studies. Currently, *maîtrise* (master's) degrees are also being awarded. *Maîtrise* holders who pass a competitive examination receive a certification known as the *agrégation* and are permitted to teach university undergraduates. *Doctorats* are awarded in both arts and sciences.

In **Germany** the doctorate is the only degree granted, but there is a tendency to add signatures such as Dr.rer.nat. (*Doktor rerum naturalium*) in natural sciences and Dr.Ing. (Doktor-Ingenieur) in engineering. For students who do not wish to meet the doctoral requirements, diploma examinations are offered.

In **Russia** diplomas are awarded on completion of a four- or five-year university course. The candidate of science (*kandidat nauk*) degree is awarded after several years of practical and academic work and completion of a thesis and is comparable to the American Ph.D. Doctor of science (*doktor nauk*) degrees are awarded only by a special national commission, in recognition of original and important research.

In **Japan** the usual degrees are the *gakushi* (bachelor), granted after four years of study, and *hakushi* (doctor), requiring from two to five years of additional study. A master's degree (*shushi*) may also be granted.

In addition to earned degrees, universities and colleges award honorary degrees, such as L.H.D. (Doctor of Humanities), Litt.D. (Doctor of Literature), and D.C.L. (Doctor of Civil Law), as a recognition of distinction without regard to academic attainment.