

MA Status

MA status or the 'special status of Master of Arts' was established in 1938. It was created to solve a problem in allowing distinguished visitors to the University, who did not already hold the Oxford MA, to enjoy the privileges of the University whilst they were here. In order to have any status in the University, it was necessary to hold the Oxford MA. The MA conferred certain privileges on the holder including, for example, membership of the University's decision-making bodies, Congregation and Convocation (see separate FAQ for a history of those bodies).

Until 1938, distinguished visitors who were here for a short time, for example, holders of the George Eastman Visiting Professorship, had the degree of MA conferred on them by decree. This enabled them to enjoy the privileges of that degree, but the University considered it 'unreasonable' for them to then be entitled for the rest of their lives to describe themselves as MAs of Oxford (*Proceedings of Hebdomadal Council*, vol 171 p9).

In June 1938, prompted by a request for special status from Brasenose College for a distinguished visitor to the college, Hebdomadal Council appointed a committee to consider whether special arrangements ought to be made to allow distinguished visitors to enjoy the privileges of the University without the payment of fees (HC 1/1/170 p.lxxvi). The report of the Committee on Special Arrangements for Distinguished Visitors, dated 13 June 1938, recommended that distinguished visitors should, while in Oxford, be given the status enjoyed by MAs, the right to wear an MA gown and be matriculated without paying any fee or dues. These privileges were to be conferred by resolution of Council. Council adopted the report at its meeting of 10 October 1938 (*Proceedings of Hebdomadal Council*, vol 171 pp.xix and 9).

The statute 'On the special status of Master of Arts' first appeared in the University statutes for 1939 (Tit II sectio VIII, p13). It allowed Hebdomadal Council to accord the status of Master of Arts to distinguished persons temporarily in Oxford for a limited period of one year (this was extended to three years in 1949). Any person accorded that status would, on his matriculation, enjoy all the rights and privileges of that degree except for the following exemptions: he would not acquire membership of Convocation and he would not be allowed to offer himself as a candidate in any University examination or for any University scholarship, prize or studentship; or for any University diploma or certificate; or be permitted to supplicate for any Oxford degree. Any person accorded the status of MA was exempted from the payment of the matriculation fee and from any other dues. Application for the status of MA was to be made to Council by the hall or college and if granted, the name of the person accorded was to be reported by the Vice-Chancellor to Congregation. Under the statute, MA status could not be awarded to an individual who was already a matriculated member of the University unless Congregation determined otherwise by decree.

The statute remained largely unchanged until 1969. In Hilary Term 1969 Hebdomadal Council decided that in future 'membership of Congregation should be open as of right to all persons holding posts in the University on salary scales with a maximum equal to or above the maximum of the lecturers' scale'. Council also

decided that other persons or categories of persons should be admitted to membership of Congregation by Council by decree; and that those eligible for membership of Congregation who do not already hold the MA (other than fellows of colleges, not already holding the MA, who should continue to be given an MA by special resolution) should be given MA status without the need for matriculation through a college (Report of Committee on Applications to Hebdomadal Council, 1 and 8 December 1969 in Proceedings of Hebdomadal Council, vol 265 p153-7).

The function of MA status became twofold: as well as being a temporary privilege for visitors, it was also being used as a way of opening up membership of Congregation, on a permanent basis, to a wider range of people. There were now two types of MA status: 1) the original temporary MA status which did not confer membership of Convocation and 2) a longer-term MA status which did confer membership of Convocation but which expired at retirement. Individuals accorded both types of MA status were still unable to enter for University examinations or proceed to higher Oxford degrees as had been the case since 1938.

The amended statute first appeared in the 1970 Statutes. From that date it changed only a little before its final abolition in 2000. The regulations (Tit V sect III, cl.V) underwent a small change in the mid 1980s when those granted the longer-term type of MA status were permitted to keep it beyond retirement and again in the early 1990s when a requirement was added for the names of those granted MA status to be published in the *University Gazette*.

MA status was abolished in 2000 with the coming into effect of the new governance arrangements proposed by the North Commission. The Report of the North Commission, published in 1997, recommended (*Commission of Inquiry, vol 1 Report Recommendation 13*) that the requirement for an individual to hold the Oxford MA or MA status in order to be a member of Congregation should be ended and the award of MA status should cease. It recommended that membership of Congregation be conferred by office and not by any personal status (*ie* degrees held). The majority of academic staff had not taken their first degree at Oxford and academic-related staff, whose seniority of office entitled them to membership of Congregation, had to be awarded MA status in order for them to take up this membership. The report argued that by changing the requirements for membership of Congregation, the University was acknowledging the varied academic and other backgrounds of Congregation and acknowledging degrees of other universities in their own right. The last conferrals of MA status were made in 2000 and it was finally abolished on 1 October 2000.