

Report on round table discussion meeting: 'UK master's: 2010 and beyond'

20 December 2007

Universities UK, Woburn House, London

This report is intended to provide an overview of opinions expressed at an event held with higher education institutions (HEIs) and those associated with institutions, including professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), on 20 December 2007 at Universities UK in London. The day provided an opportunity for participants to share and explore perceptions, experiences and concerns surrounding the delivery of United Kingdom (UK) master's and the wider context for UK higher education in Europe. Afternoon discussions were dedicated to collecting feedback on a draft new reference point for UK master's produced for QAA.

1 The delivery of UK master's in the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

1.1 Discussions covered a wide range of issues associated with the UK's position in the EHEA and its impact on the delivery of master's awards. Some key themes emerged, which are identified below. In some cases there was a clear convergence of opinion while in others opinion differed and this is indicated in the notes that follow. Some of the eight breakout groups spent time gathering and exchanging information with experts, suggesting that there is an appetite for greater dissemination of key policy developments in this area.

Qualification frameworks and the use of academic credit

1.2 Of all of the points raised during the course of the day's discussions, the most voiced possible concerns about external perceptions of UK master's and uncertainties about possible future recognition issues. That is, how master's awards in the UK are perceived elsewhere in Europe and further afield where awards at second cycle tend to be of longer duration. These concerns were raised even though there was general agreement that master's degrees in the UK are considered to meet the qualification descriptor of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF), and the 'Dublin descriptor' for the second cycle as set out in the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FQ-EHEA)¹.

¹ The SCQF has already passed through a process of self-certification against the FQ-EHEA to demonstrate concordance between the two. The FHEQ will be the subject of a similar process in spring 2008.

1.3 Participants noted that they would welcome a greater emphasis being placed on learning outcomes in comparison to the duration of study which appears to dominate some discussions within the Bologna Process, as this would potentially assure other countries about the standard of UK awards.

1.4 Associated with concerns over the comparability and recognition of UK qualifications was an awareness of how credit values for master's awards in the UK relate to the typical values associated with second cycle awards in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Some felt that it was insufficient to state that the UK meets the 60 ECTS (120 CATS²) minimum associated with a second cycle award and that the UK sector should be concerned about how this might be perceived externally, particularly in a competitive market place.

1.5 An option being pursued by some HEIs is to assign credit to activities undertaken outside of normal term-time study, thus raising the overall credit/workload allocation in some integrated master's programmes. However, such an approach was not felt to be a realistic for all institutions because of the extra resource implications and support for students.

1.6 Concerns were also expressed about the figure of 75 ECTS in the current ECTS user guidelines as the maximum possible attainable credit in a single year of study. Participants felt that the UK should seek to have this caveat removed as the ECTS guidelines are revised. Delegates noted that they would welcome further updates on such developments as they progress.

1.7 Clear differences emerged between disciplines during discussions about existing provision. Programmes of longer than one year (typically 18-24 months) exist as a normal, funded part of provision in some areas. For other areas, particularly where longer master's programmes would be welcomed, it was felt that current arrangements for funding prevent such programmes being offered. Yet many disciplines would not welcome programmes of longer than a single full-time year, or equivalent, of study irrespective of whether places were suitably funded or not. In these cases, a longer course of study is not seen as necessary for effective education/training or preparation for research in the discipline. Furthermore, it was noted that amidst current diversity in practice between different countries both within and outside Europe, a shorter one-year master's might remain an attractive option for some students.

1.8 Many, but not all, participants were reassured by a presentation that highlighted the level of variation that exists in the structure and duration of second cycle programmes/awards in other European countries. Some, by contrast, reported that they found such variation disconcerting, with the Bologna Process appearing to expose and intensify the differences that exist, so making its overarching goals of recognition and mobility even harder to achieve.

1.9 Variation in HEIs' approaches to awarding integrated master's was the basis of some concerns. Variation exists (both between disciplines and between institutions) in whether both an undergraduate and a master's degree is awarded at the end of the period of study; whether the master's award is classified; and whether such master's degrees are awarded in postgraduate or graduate award ceremonies. It was felt that such variations all had the potential for confusion within European fora.

² CATS – Credit Accumulation Transfer Scheme

1.10 Comments also focused on the need for improving understanding of the UK system of higher education awards within institutions in other countries since this is particularly important for student mobility. Such understanding at an operational level is essential, and could be further aided by the National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC), for example, and others.

Mutual recognition in professionally-regulated disciplines

1.11 Groups also discussed the basis of mutual recognition in disciplines with a strong professional element. For these areas, the currency for recognition (and therefore mobility) is that of professional competencies rather than the academic level of the award (and associated credit values) per se. This distinction is strongest for those sectoral professions that are covered by the European Union (EU) Directive (2005/36/EC), which includes medicine, dentistry, veterinary science, pharmacy and architecture. However, similar arguments about recognition apply for engineering and other professional areas not covered by the Directive. Whether the Bologna Process has included sufficient discussion about the bases of mutual recognition of professional (especially professionally-regulated) areas and non-professional areas was questioned.

1.12 The potential for PSRBs to work together with their equivalents in European contexts was suggested as a worthwhile means of raising understanding of national qualifications and it was noted that this is already underway in many disciplines.

Progression, including entry to doctoral programmes

1.13 Concerns were raised about the opportunity for progression from master's study into doctoral programmes. Some challenges to the admittance of students holding UK awards into doctoral programmes were reported. These may remain isolated cases but a concern raised by some was that it was unclear whether the Bologna Process might serve to exacerbate such cases or provoke new ones. If (some) UK master's were considered to be insufficient for entry to a PhD programme, there could be an associated drop in the number of students from home and abroad enrolling for such master's programmes.

1.14 Differences between disciplines emerged during discussion in terms of typical progression routes to doctoral study. For example, in some subjects it is more common than in others for graduates with bachelor's degrees with honours to enter into PhD programmes directly. It was generally felt that this was an area where more discussion within European fora would be helpful.

Funding arrangements and student support

1.15 It was noted that under current funding arrangements, there is felt to be limited or no opportunity for changing the duration of master's programmes. Several participants noted that a lack of clear information and a clear platform for discussion was impeding discussions about the optimal model for master's level study in some disciplines.

Employability of UK graduates

1.16 The employability of UK graduates does not feature directly in the 10 Bologna Process 'action lines' but the Bologna Process is said to play a key role in contributing to the EU's Lisbon Strategy, whose goals include the creation of more

numerous and better jobs. The Lisbon Strategy was not discussed by the groups but the employability of UK graduates was raised in relation to external perception of their qualifications. It was argued that if the qualifications held by UK graduates were considered to be inferior to those obtained elsewhere (largely on account of differences in qualification length), this could affect the ability of UK graduates to compete for jobs at local, national or international levels.

1.17 It was suggested that more information is needed on destinations of UK graduates in order to identify any basis for these fears. For some disciplines, the principal employment market for UK graduates lies outside of Europe and the EHEA might be regarded as a competitor for UK higher education. If the Bologna Process helps to increase the employability of UK graduates, this was felt to be a very attractive prospect. If, on the other hand, the fears over recognition issues noted above were to be realised and UK higher education suffered a loss of reputation, this could potentially have an adverse effect on graduate employability outside of the UK. This was raised particularly in relation to the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

Recruitment of overseas students to UK programmes

1.18 Many participants were concerned about the continued ability of the UK to recruit overseas students onto its programmes, although it was also noted that the UK has a well-established two-cycle award structure and a strong reputation for its quality assurance procedures.

Towards 2010

1.19 Participants sought clearer information about, and leadership on, the position of the UK within the EHEA and how this might 'translate' into operational terms for HEIs. Leadership should reflect and represent the views of the sector, although in a diverse sector with different priorities in adopting the Bologna agenda, this could be challenging.

1.20 Current variation in practice relating to the delivery of UK master's was viewed by the majority of participants to be a strength of the UK system, reflecting institutional autonomy and providing for the diverse needs of different disciplines and students to be met. It was suggested that this variation does not prevent a clear message to European partners within policy fora that the UK has confidence in its postgraduate provision; indeed it may be a strong part of that message.

1.21 Overall, there appeared to be an appetite for a greater dissemination of information to institutions and those associated with institutions on policy developments within a European context.

Next steps

1.22 A copy of this report will be made available to a wider audience on QAA's website. Any feedback received will help to inform future policy discussions and the work undertaken on the UK's behalf by the UK HE Europe Unit.

2 Feedback on a draft new reference point for UK master's

2.1 Participants were also invited to comment on the draft of a possible new reference point for UK master's degrees produced for QAA by an external development group (draft *Master's degree characteristics* December 2007). This was developed following opinions received at a consultation event (February 2006) on master's benchmarking. The new reference point was intended to be of use to programme designers, deliverers and reviewers, and others.

Scope of the new reference point

2.2 Different views were expressed about the potential scope of such a document. Some thought that all types of Master (M) level qualifications (not just master's degrees) should be covered by the document in recognition of the fact that other types of M level awards are frequently found as exit points to master's. Some of the opinions expressed suggested that further clarity about the distinction between qualification type and qualification level might be helpful and this was explicitly suggested by one group. Some suggested that the material in the draft could be incorporated into the revised FHEQ, or at least that the two documents need to be aligned.

2.3 Views were divided on whether the document should include comment on the relationship between master's and doctoral study, and associated issues of progression.

Purpose and value of the new reference point

2.4 The majority of participants saw value in the draft new reference point and, in some cases, multiple values. Roles in designing programmes and assisting students, employers and professional bodies in understanding current provision in taught postgraduate programmes were important. It was also suggested that the document had potential legitimacy in a European context in describing UK master's awards.

2.5 Most felt that the principal value of the new reference point lay in its potential as a tool for interpreting award titles, although acknowledging at the same time that the UK has such variation and differentiation in the use of degree titles that the task is a challenging one. The draft was not seen as constraining on current practice and was suggested to be helpful in informing new provision.

Structure and content

2.6 The introductory section must be clear about the purpose and the intended audience of the new reference point .

2.7 Opinion was divided on the utility of the table of characteristics, with some feeling that it was the most useful part while others suggested that it might be regarded as over prescription. All agreed that more explanatory text was needed.

2.8 There was detailed discussion around the 'dimensions' of 'structure', 'learning approach', 'intended entrant', 'intended graduate' and 'external status including accreditation arrangements' in terms of both content and wording; detailed points were provided to assist in further work.

2.9 Suggestions for additional dimensions included 'assessment' and 'mode of delivery' (eg campus-based, work-based, etc). Master's gained through continuing professional development might also be included and it was proposed that the final document should include a discussion around 'M-ness'.

Wording

2.10 A variety of views were expressed about the wording of the document; it was generally felt that greater clarity of purpose would assist with greater clarity of wording.

Next steps

2.11 Feedback on the draft master's degree characteristics document will be considered by QAA in consultation with the external development group. A second version will be prepared in light of the comments received to go forward for formal consultation with the sector later in 2008.

Further information on any of the points raised may be obtained from Dr Laura Bellingham at L.Bellingham@qaa.ac.uk