

Framework of reference for Master-level degrees in Europe

by Anita Lehikoinen

The aim of the Helsinki conference was to find a common framework of reference for Master-level degrees in the European Higher Education Area. As the study made by the European University Association (EUA) shows, most European countries have introduced or are about to introduce a degree structure based on a Bachelor, Master and Doctoral sequence. There is considerable variety in the length of the programmes leading to a Master's, but there seems to be a trend towards a total extent of 300 ECTS credits.

Among the most heatedly debated topics in the conference were the minimum length of the degree programmes and the institutional aspects of such degrees. Matters related to international aspects of quality assurance, joint degrees, mobility and export of European education were also discussed. The following framework of reference was agreed:

- A Master degree is a second-cycle higher education qualification. Entry usually requires a completed Bachelor degree at a recognised higher education institution. Bachelor and Master degrees should have different defined outcomes and should be awarded at different levels.
 - Students awarded a Master degree must have achieved the level of knowledge and understanding, or high level in artistic competence when appropriate, which allows them to integrate knowledge, and handle complexity, formulate judgements and communicate their conclusions to an expert and to a non-expert audience. Students with a Master degree will have the learning skills needed to pursue further studies or research in a largely self-directed, autonomous manner.
 - All Bachelor degrees should open access to Master studies and all Master degrees should give access to Doctoral studies. A transition from Master level to Doctoral studies without the formal award of a Master's degree should be considered possible if the student demonstrates that he/she has the necessary abilities.
- Differences in orientation or profile

of programmes should not affect the civil effect of the Master degrees.

- Bachelor and Master programmes should be described on the basis of content, quality and learning outcomes, not only according to the duration of programmes or other formal characteristics.
- There are several ongoing international projects related to developing coherent quality assurance mechanisms in the EHEA. These should be continued, and international aspects of national and regional quality assurance systems further developed.
- Joint Master programmes at the European level should be developed to promote intra-European cooperation and attract talented students and researchers from other continents to study and work in Europe. Particular attention must be paid to solving recognition problems related to joint degrees.
- While Master degree programmes normally carry 90–120 ECTS credits, the minimum requirements should amount to 60 ECTS credits at Master level. As the length and the content of Bachelor degrees vary, there is a need to have similar flexibility at the Master level. Credits awarded should be of the appropriate profile.
- In certain fields, integrated one-tier programmes leading to Master degrees may continue to exist. Yet, opportunities for access to intermediate qualifications and transfer to other programmes should be encouraged.
- Programmes leading to a Master degree may have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. Master degrees can be taken at universities and, in some countries, in other higher education institutions.
- In order to increase transparency it is important that the specific orientation and profile of a given qualification is explained in the Diploma Supplement issued to the student. ■

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