Master’s degree characteristics

Institute of Physics response to the QAA draft for consultation

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27 November 2009
Dear Sir/Madam

Master's degree characteristics – draft for consultation

The Institute of Physics is a scientific charity devoted to increasing the practice, understanding and application of physics. It has a worldwide membership of over 36,000 and is a leading communicator of physics-related science to all audiences, from specialists through to government and the general public. Its publishing company, IOP Publishing, is a world leader in scientific publishing and the electronic dissemination of physics.

The Institute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the QAA consultation on ‘Master's degree characteristics’.

If you need any further information on the points raised, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully

Robyn Henriegel
Manager, Higher Education and Accreditation
General comments

The draft document indicates that it is not prescriptive but ‘describes characteristics’ and therefore the document largely details current practice. As such, the usefulness of the document above and beyond qualifications frameworks and appropriate benchmark statements is not always clear. One aim of the document is to provide information to students seeking clarification on the different forms of master’s degrees and this aim is met. It would also be useful to those unfamiliar with the UK system. However it offers those familiar with the system little information where it could be useful, such as guidance as to how to demonstrate compatibility with the Bologna process.

Specific comments

1.4 Structure and delivery

Paragraph three, covering integrated master’s awards, states that such programmes include a three-year bachelor’s degree with honours. The wording implies that students either are, or could be, awarded a BSc as well as an integrated master’s but in the majority of physics departments this is not the case. In fact a number would not be able to award a BSc to students that failed to complete the final year as they would not have met the learning outcomes of the equivalent BSc. If it is the intention that such students should be awarded a BSc then some integrated master’s degrees will need to be redesigned to accommodate this.

1.6 Teaching, learning and assessment

In paragraph two, the reference to the Code of practice on ‘collaborate’ provision and work based learning should presumably be collaborative.

2 Naming of awards

The document rightly does not attempt to address whether all master’s degrees are correctly titled. However, as one aim of the document is to describe the UK system it would appear appropriate to clarify the nature of the MAs awarded by Cambridge, Oxford and undergraduate MAs in Scotland.

3 Bologna

The preface indicates that the document could provide a reference point for those seeking an insight into master’s degrees in the UK and the descriptive nature of the document certainly fulfils this aim. The document does however fail to provide guidance where it would be most useful, as to how UK master’s degrees fit in with
the Bologna process. Considering master’s programmes are the ones that are most affected by Bologna the limited attention given to this subject is unhelpful. The document compounds this by paying scant regard to ECTS and the fact that some UK master’s only meet the minimum requirements. ECTS is of significant importance to the Bologna process and to the recognition and acceptance of UK master’s degrees in the rest of Europe.

Line 2, insert ‘of’ after ‘mobility’.

Appendix 1

Under ‘intended entrants’ on pages 10 and 12, it should say specialist/advanced study master’s and professional/practice master’s rather than research master’s.

The same section on page 10 states that: “… progression to the final two or three (in Scotland) years of the programme is determined two years before the intended year of completion”. This makes no sense in the Scottish case as progression to the final three years cannot by definition be determined as late as two years before completion. The statement is also not universally true as progression requirements to some integrated Masters require the decision to be made earlier than stated.

Page 12, in the first bullet point under Programme purposes, substitute ‘profession’ for ‘progression’.
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