

ACADEMIC BOARD – MEETING 10/01 (13 DECEMBER 2001)

COURSEWORK MASTERS PROGRAMS

BACKGROUND

Guidelines for coursework higher degrees were approved by the Academic Board in 1998 following a proliferation of graduate and postgraduate programs in recent years. The guidelines maintain *inter alia* that “in principle, a masters degree should involve at least a fifth year of tertiary study or equivalent” and that “entry to a masters degree of 100 points . . . should only be available to honours graduates, or students with the equivalent to an honours degree in terms of professional experience or academic training” (*Guidelines for the Submission of Course Changes*. Academic Programs Committee, 2001, cl 6.4.2 – see attached). Similarly, the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) states that “most Masters degrees require the equivalent of two years of study post the three year bachelor degree or one year of study post the Bachelor Honours degree or four year (or longer) Bachelor degree”.

Two other guiding principles underlying coursework masters at the University of Melbourne are that:

- the program must contain at least 100 points of study at Masters level and
- the entry pathway must ensure that enrolled students have sufficient preparation to succeed in the program.

Three forms of coursework Masters degrees have been described by McInnis *et al* (1995, pp 23-33). They are:

- traditional Masters courses (type 1);
- programs focussing on enhancing professional specialisation (type 2); and
- programs offering opportunities to engage in new fields of professional study (type 3).

The traditional coursework Masters program is normally a fifth year of study building on a four-year honours degree in the discipline. The program normally contains advanced theory, research training and a “minor” dissertation. It could lead to entry to a doctoral program. Type 1 Masters courses comply with clause 6.4.2 of the *Guidelines*.

A program that enhances professional specialisation normally builds on an undergraduate degree in a closely related discipline (a “cognate” degree). It normally has a very specific focus and may lead to professional accreditation and is thus likely to be a terminal program. Type 2 Masters courses would also normally comply with clause 6.4.2 of the *Guidelines*.

A program engaging students in a new field is one that does not require specific undergraduate preparation but requires an undergraduate degree for entry. These programs are often cross-disciplinary in nature and may lead to a change in career direction for the student. “A small but important sub-set of courses in this category are the modified professional specialisation courses which give students credentials to work in fields for which they have no undergraduate qualification. These necessarily require some bridging studies, often provided within undergraduate courses. Such courses raise particular concerns about quality assurance since they most obviously challenge the meaning of ‘Masters’” (*op cit*, 26). Thus the nature of Type 3 Masters courses call into question their ability to comply with clause 6.4.2 of the *Guidelines* or with the AQF.

A combined working group of Academic Programs Committee (APC) and Selection Procedures Committee (SPC) was established in 2000 to provide recommendations in respect of professional experience in the context of equivalence to an honours degree (APC & SPC, 2001). The report commenced by adopting the APC *Guidelines* (2001). A survey was conducted of Masters programs throughout the University and it was noted that many programs exist in each of the three forms envisaged by McInnis *et al*. However, the working group limited the forms of masters to two types: the traditional masters (Type 1) and the

professional masters (a combination of Types 2 and 3). This may be a reflection of the AQF which appears to do likewise.

The report recommended that the use of work experience as a substitute for an honours degree should be discontinued and that it should be considered as one form of pathway. The report also recommended minimum requirements for entry pathways and academic content for all combinations and permutations of the forms of programs having regard to:

- whether or not prior qualifications were in cognate disciplines;
- the length and standard (pass or honours) of the prior qualifications;
- the length and type of professional work experience required; and
- the length of the Masters program.

The report went on to make recommendations about the nature of professional work experience.

The report was approved by APC and SPC and was on the Agenda of Academic Board for meeting 5/01. After a presentation by the President of the Academic Board of the findings of the working group to Deans at Lindenderry on 21 June 2001, the report was withdrawn from Academic Board business. A second combined working group was established to review Masters programs. It is understood that the Deans requested that the Academic Board officers review the report of the first working group on the ground that the attempt to create a generic Masters degree template resulted in overly prescriptive requirements in respect of the Type 3 Masters course.

The terms of reference of the second working group ~~were~~ are to review coursework Masters programs and in particular to:

- Reconsider the *Guidelines* for higher degrees (section 6.4);
- Review the APC/SPC Report of the working group on work experience; and
- Make recommendations to APC/SPC and thence to the Academic Board for alterations and additions to the *Guidelines*.

The group comprising Professors J Robinson (convenor), J Angus, D Alcorn, and S Nicholas and Associate Professor R Misson has met and reviewed the *Guidelines* and other relevant documents.

The purpose of these guidelines is to establish a framework for Masters courses at the University of Melbourne. It is recognised that although there are the three forms of coursework masters programs at the university, and although they are quite different having regard to the varying student backgrounds, entry pathways and program contents, it is appropriate to unify and simplify the guidelines as far as possible. Three fundamental elements of a Masters degree are matters of Faculty judgement, namely:

- what constitutes an “appropriate” Bachelors degree as opposed to a “cognate” bachelors degree;
- what is the relevance and/or specification of any professional work experience in the entry pathway; and
- what is genuine Masters level study.

Faculties need to assure APC and SPC on these three matters when proposing Masters programs.

The guidelines are intended to be prescriptive, but it is recognised that there may need to be exceptions in particular cases. Such exceptions will be rare and a strong case must be made for them to APC and SPC in the first instance.

The guidelines are intended to provide minimum requirements for Masters courses. They may not be appropriate in many Faculties in which the current practices exceed these guidelines.

Web pages of a selection of Group of Eight and Universitas 21 Universities have been searched. The requirements for Masters courses at these universities are generally comparable with the recommendations set out in the attached paper.

Existing Guidelines for the Submission of Course Changes

The existing Guidelines (APC, 2001) in respect of Masters degrees follow:

6.4.2 Masters Degrees

In principle, a Masters degree should involve at least a fifth year of tertiary study or its equivalent.

6.4.2.1 entry to a Masters degree of 100 points (i.e. one year EFT study) from an undergraduate degree should only be available to honours graduates, or students with the equivalent to an honours degree in terms of professional experience or academic training.

6.4.2.2 when the first part of a Masters is identical with a Postgraduate Diploma, it must meet the requirements of point 1.7 above (i.e. no more than 25 points may be lower-level undergraduate subjects, those subjects to be taken from the later years of the undergraduate course and normally to be required as background studies to specialisations within the course).

6.4.2.3 100 point Masters should normally consist entirely of postgraduate subjects, except that up to 25 points of later year undergraduate subjects may be included to provide essential background studies.

6.4.2.4 a Postgraduate Diploma may be the first part of a Masters degree.

6.4.2.5 in cases where the first 100 points of a 150 point Masters is a Postgraduate Diploma, if a student has taken out the Diploma award, he/she is required to complete a further 100 points to take out the Masters award.

References

- Academic Board (2001): *Attributes of Melbourne postgraduate coursework graduates*. The University of Melbourne.
- Academic Programs Committee (2001): *Guidelines for the Submission of Course Changes*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.
- Academic Programs Committee and Selection Procedures Committee (2001): *Report of Working Group 2: Work Experience*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.
- McInnis C, R James & A Morris (1995): *The Masters Degree by Coursework: Growth Diversity and Quality Assurance*. Canberra: Department of Employment Education and Training.
- Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (2001): *Australian Qualifications Framework*. Melbourne: Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS COMMITTEE
SELECTION PROCEDURES COMMITTEE

COMBINED WORKING GROUP
COURSEWORK MASTERS PROGRAMS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Form of Masters program

While Traditionally a Masters program has been defined by its year level as being at least a fifth year of sequential tertiary study. ~~The Working Group wishes to recommend that Masters programs be defined by the nature of the study.~~ The Working Group wishes to uphold this notion and affirm that a Masters degree should not be awarded until after at least five years of learning at tertiary level. However the Group believes that the emphasis should be placed not on serving the required number of years but on the nature of the study in a Masters degree and its outcomes. A Masters program at the University of Melbourne must have 100 points of study at Masters level; this refers to the level of the study, its aims and objectives, its breadth and depth, its presentation and its assessment. The outcomes for students in the programs will reflect the attributes of a Melbourne postgraduate coursework graduate. It is up to the Faculty concerned to demonstrate to APC that its programs are at Masters level.

Recommendation 1

A Masters degree will contain at least 100 points of Masters level study (one EFT year's load).

Recommendation 2

Faculties must assure APC that the course content is at the appropriate level for the award.

Entry pathways

The main principle behind the establishment of an entry pathway is that the candidate should be sufficiently prepared academically, and in terms of professional experience as required, to successfully complete the program. Regulation 11.1.R3 – Principles of Selection for Entry to Courses states that “The University will select from those students likely to succeed in its courses”. The nature of the entry pathways also depends upon the prior academic background, the requirement for professional work experience and the length and content of the Masters program. It is accepted that the basis of an entry pathway to a Masters program is an “appropriate” Bachelors degree. The term “appropriate” refers to the topic of the study (its “cognateness”), the number of years of study (three years or four or more years) and the performance of the graduate (pass or honours). ~~In other words, an appropriate Bachelors degree is one that provides sufficient preparation for an applicant to successfully complete a Masters degree with at least 100 points of Masters level subjects.~~ With a three-year undergraduate degree, there will normally be 100 points of further study and/or relevant work experience as a foundation for the year of fifth-level Masters study. Where an applicant does not hold an appropriate Bachelors degree, the applicant will usually be required to undertake additional studies prescribed by the Faculty to add specialised knowledge to the generic skills developed in prior tertiary studies.

It is up to the Faculty concerned to demonstrate to SPC that the proposed entry pathways are a sufficient preparation for candidates to succeed in Masters level study. The Principles of Selection require that where student selection involves tests, interviews, work experience, auditions, etc., a Resolution, recommended by SPC, must be approved by Academic Board. At the conclusion of each selection round, Faculties must complete a Postgraduate Selection Report for the Selection Procedures Committee. This is the reporting mechanism to Academic Board required by the Principles of Selection.

Recommendation 3

Applicants for admission to a coursework Masters degree must normally have completed an appropriate Bachelors degree.

Recommendation 4

In addition to an appropriate Bachelors degree, and depending upon the applicant's background and experience, entry to a Masters degree is via one of the following pathways: direct entry, preliminary studies such as graduate and postgraduate certificates and diplomas, professional work experience or some combination of professional work experience and preliminary study.

Recommendation 5

Where applicants have not completed an appropriate Bachelors degree, the pathway to the 100 points of study at Masters level will normally consist of at least 100 points of preliminary study or a combination of work experience and preliminary study. ~~In some exceptional cases, the Faculty may make a case that work experience without any preliminary further study is sufficient to prepare the students for success at Masters level.~~

Recommendation 6

Faculties must assure SPC that the entry pathway is appropriate for the Masters degree.

Professional work experience

Professional work experience is no longer to be treated as equivalent to academic study: it may be simply an element within an entry pathway to Masters programs. Where work experience is a requirement of the entry pathway, the Faculty must specify it to be full-time equivalent, documented and relevant.

Recommendation 7

Where professional work experience is an element in the pathway, only relevant professional work experience will be allowed. The Faculty must ensure that relevant professional work experience is documented for selection and recorded on the student's file.

Recommendation 8

The relevant professional work experience should not be gained concurrently with the Masters degree but must be a prerequisite for the course.

Recommendation 9

Where work experience is part of the pathway to Masters study, each year of relevant full-time work experience may ~~credit students with up to be substituted for~~ 50 points of preliminary study. ~~A maximum of 100 points of preliminary study may be substituted for relevant work experience.~~

Implementation

Following approval by the Board, these recommendations will be incorporated into the next ~~amendment~~ revision of the *Guidelines*. Faculties will be required to review their Masters programs to ensure that they comply with the updated *Guidelines*.

Recommendation 10

All Masters courses should be reviewed by Faculties and details of any necessary changes should be submitted to SPC and APC as soon as possible for implementation no later than 2004. Students who are already in Masters courses and those entering in 2002 and 2003 are covered by existing arrangements.