

**ACADEMIC PROGRAMS COMMITTEE
SELECTION PROCEDURES COMMITTEE****COMBINED WORKING GROUP
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 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.