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Executive Summary

The Europe Note clarifies the implications of the Bologna Process for one-year Masters programmes. It sets out the facts to dispel confusion in the sector over this issue.

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Masters degrees and the Bologna Process

Introduction

1. This Europe Note clarifies the implications for the UK's one-year Masters programmes of the Bologna Process to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It outlines the misunderstandings surrounding the issue and sets out the facts in an effort to dispel confusion in the sector over the consequences of Bologna for the one-year Masters.

The Bologna Process and the second cycle (Masters)

2. The Bologna Process was launched in 1999 by the Bologna Declaration which set *inter alia* the following objective for its signatory countries.

“Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years. The degree awarded after the first cycle shall also be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries”.

3. The Bologna Declaration did not set out the number of years required to acquire a Masters degree.
4. The following biennial Bologna ministerial summit in Prague in 2001 noted progress in establishing two main cycles and stated that, “Programmes leading to a degree may, and indeed should, have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs”.
5. The most recent Bologna ministerial Communiqué, signed in Berlin in 2003, acknowledged that, “a comprehensive restructuring of the European landscape of higher education is now under way”. Furthermore, Ministers agreed that, “First and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a

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diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies”.

Why the confusion?

6. Many Bologna signatory countries across the rest of Europe have needed to make substantial changes to their systems in response to the Bologna Process. Continental higher education systems have moved to divide five and six year programmes into two cycles, resulting in first cycle programmes, followed by second cycle programmes of two years. Across Europe most institutions now offer courses based on a 3+2 model; where the undergraduate qualification is four years long this may be followed by a one-year Masters. Both of these models result in a total of five years study. The UK higher education systems already have two-cycle systems in place. The three-year bachelor degree followed by the one-year Masters programme (3+1), results in a minimum of four years study. In Scotland, the four-year Bachelors with Honours is followed by the one-year Masters. These differences in the length of the second cycle have led to some concern about recognition of the one-year UK Masters, potentially placing its future under threat. As Bologna signatory countries make changes to their higher education systems towards the 3+2 model, the one-year Masters is repeatedly subject to attack by some influential individuals and in some Bologna fora. The myth that Bologna requires a 3+2 structure is thus continued.

7. In 2002 a European University Association (EUA) Survey on Joint Masters Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe¹ included the suggestion that participants at the forthcoming Berlin ministerial summit in 2003 should, “agree on a definition that a Masters degree in the European Higher Education Area requires normally the completion of 300 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits”. Across the UK, each academic year of study is allocated 120 credits. For ECTS this figure is 60 ECTS credits per academic year². The above suggestion would therefore mean that students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland would need to complete an extra year of study (five in total) before gaining a Masters degree.

8. In 2002 ECTS Counsellors raised concerns over the one-year Masters model during a site visit to Hull University.

¹ The EUA Survey on Joint Masters Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe by Christian Tauch and Andrejs Rauhvargers (2002) can be found at: http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Survey_Master_Joint_degrees.pdf

² The Commission's guide on ECTS states that 'ECTS is based on the convention that 60 credits measure the workload of a full-time student during one academic year'. Please see the following site for details: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects_en.html

9. The second phase of the European Commission-funded Tuning Educational Structures in Europe project³ identifies the need to distinguish between teaching time, independent study time, field-work and preparing for and sitting exams. When all of these are considered, the project notes that the discrepancies in length of Masters programmes across Europe are less significant than they may appear to be. Tuning II will publish its definitive conclusions in December 2004. A preliminary paper prepared by the Tuning II Management Committee notes the following:
- Programmes in nearly all countries in Europe fit in the range 34-40 weeks per year or 1400 to 1680 hours per year.
 - The average programme length is 1520 hours per year.
 - If a programme lasts twelve months in total (a calendar year rather than an academic year) it should be allocated 75 ECTS credits.

This is based on average figures for estimated notional student hours of learning time and ratioed up from one academic year. Institutions in the UK may not regard this as a sound basis for policy.

10. There is concern in the UK sector that as transparency instruments are increasingly used for qualifications across Europe in line with Bologna objectives, the one-year Masters programme (and/or by association our honours bachelors programmes) may be considered 'lightweight', if not in skills, at least in curricula knowledge or with respect to the weight of the dissertation. Such allegations, if not refuted, could clearly have damaging consequences for the international reputation of UK higher education.

The facts

11. As indicated above, the Bologna Process does not stipulate the length of the second cycle Masters qualification. While the 1999 Bologna Declaration states the first cycle should be a minimum of three years, none of the ministerial Communiqués that underpin the intergovernmental process make reference to the length of the second cycle. Rather, in parallel to the convergence of Europe's higher education systems, the Bologna Process champions the diversity of the EHEA. The Bologna Declaration states that, "We hereby undertake to attain these objectives - within the framework of our institutional competences and taking full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of University autonomy – to consolidate the European area of higher education". There is

³ The Tuning Project seeks to "tune" educational structures in Europe with a view to the development of the European Higher Education Area. The project opens up a debate on the nature and importance of subject-specific and general competences. The project identifies and exchanges information on common subject-based reference points. For further information please see: <http://www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm>

continued reference in Bologna ministerial Communiqués to the importance of signatory countries' individuality and diversity, for example in Prague in 2001, "Ministers reaffirmed that efforts to promote mobility must be continued to enable students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff to benefit from the richness of the European Higher Education Area including its democratic values, diversity of cultures and languages and the diversity of the higher education systems". Furthermore, Per Nyborg, Chair of the Bologna Secretariat, made no mention of second cycle length in a recent speech in Russia, and rather focused on the importance of diversity across the EHEA.

12. The official Bologna seminar on Master-level Degrees in Helsinki, Finland, in 2003 recommended that, "While master degree programmes normally carry 90 - 120 ECTS credits, the minimum requirements should amount to 60 ECTS credits (one academic year) 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". While there are currently no descriptors for outcomes in credit terms, this issue will remain on the table, under consideration in various Bologna fora. The Helsinki recommendations⁴ pave the way for the one-year Masters to keep its place in the EHEA but are interpreted differently across Europe. 60 ECTS at Masters level is regarded with suspicion by some and is often only applicable after a four year first degree cycle. The 90 ECTS lower limit recommendation carries weight across Europe. The outcomes of Bologna seminars attended by key Bologna policy-makers are therefore clearly influential in the Process.
13. The UK is not the only Bologna signatory country whose system includes a one-year Masters programme. Ireland and Malta also offer one-year Masters degrees following a three-year undergraduate degree⁵. In the Netherlands Masters programmes must be at least one year long in science and humanities. The Swedish and Flemish Ministries for Education have recently produced publications clearly specifying a minimum of 60 ECTS credits for Masters programmes. Bologna developments will need to accommodate all of these countries higher education systems.⁶
14. The number of hours studied or notional 'time studied' is only one measure of a programme. The UK assessment system is primarily concerned with demonstrated learning outcomes focusing on the competences a student acquires from a study programme. In July 2004 Scotland will host a Bologna seminar on learning outcomes. This event will be an important opportunity for the UK to reiterate the case for learning outcomes as the basis for a EHEA. Learning outcomes also have a fundamental role to play in the assessment of lifelong learning – a shared European priority.

⁴ For the full recommendations please see: <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Results.pdf>

⁵ Ongoing changes are taking place in European higher education systems.

⁶ It should also be noted that some two year Masters are offered in the UK.

15. Recognition bodies in third countries, for example in the US and Canada, have not questioned the status of one-year Masters programmes in Europe. Third country recognition of one-year Masters is important, not only for UK students but also for students from other European countries studying in the UK.
16. General European acceptance of the Dublin Descriptors⁷ – generic descriptors for qualifications at first and second (and third) cycle – also suggests that if one-year Masters degrees broadly reflect the Dublin Descriptors then the duration is irrelevant.
17. The one-year Masters programme supports the Bologna Process' drive to make programmes more market-oriented and, as the Berlin Communiqué puts it, “accommodate a diversity of labour market needs”. The UK's drop-out rate is lower than many other European countries with longer second cycle programmes. A shorter second cycle qualification arms the student with skills for the labour market in a short period of time.
18. Countries with cohorts well qualified for entry and a tradition of long programmes, of five years or more, leading directly to *Diplom* (now second cycle) qualifications including a heavy dissertation are failing to recognise the value of second cycle awards based on shorter programmes. One-year full-time Masters programmes in the UK and elsewhere in Europe enjoy international success and attract thousands of students from the rest of Europe and other parts of the world each year. The European Commission is aware of this success and the one-year Masters is eligible for participation in the Commission's new Erasmus Mundus programme which supports Masters exchange programmes with non-EU students. The EUA's recent project on Joint Masters also featured one-year programmes.
19. The one-year Masters facilitates lifelong learning by allowing students to acquire skills in a short period of time. Lifelong learning has been championed by the European Union and is a key element of the Bologna Process. The Berlin Communiqué calls for the European Higher Education Area, “to encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths, opportunities and techniques”. It is to be noted that in 2002/2003 the majority of postgraduate students (54%) in the UK were studying part-time. If Bologna is to support the recent trend towards alternative ways of learning, the one-year Masters will have a place in the EHEA. Assessment using learning outcomes, rather than length of study, facilitates lifelong learning.
20. The UK also operates some integrated four-year courses leading directly to a Masters qualification, particularly in the fields of mathematics, science and engineering (for example, MEng, MSci, MPhys and MChem). The recommendations of the 2003 Helsinki Bologna seminar (see paragraph 13) state, “In certain fields, there may continue to exist integrated one-tier programmes leading to master degrees. Yet, opportunities for access to intermediate qualifications and transfer to other programmes should be encouraged”.

⁷ For more information on the Dublin descriptors please see the web site of the Joint Quality Initiative (foot note 5) and http://www.jointquality.org/content/ierland/Shared_descriptors_Ba_Ma.doc

21. The Europe Unit and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have consistently argued the above points over the last two years. For example:

- In 2002 the UK was defended regarding the outcomes of the above-mentioned EUA survey on joint masters.
- In the run-up to the 2003 Berlin summit the UK's interests were defended in initial drafts of the ministerial Communiqué.
- The European Commission-funded website 'Eurydice' was corrected after claiming that the Bologna Process requires signatory countries to adopt a 3+2 model.
- The European Commission was persuaded to include one-year Masters programmes in its new Erasmus-Mundus programme.

Advice/information for UK HEIs

22. The Europe Unit will remain vigilant on this issue in future and will continue to clarify misconceptions to defend the one-year Masters. Higher education institutions and credit frameworks make and support their own decisions and recommendations about ECTS credit ratings. The Quality Assurance Agency has been influential through participation in Joint Quality Initiative (JQI)⁸ activity and associated discussions in the Trans-national European Evaluation Project (TEEP)⁹.

23. This paper illustrates that there is continental confusion over the status of the one-year Masters within the Bologna Process and that recognition of the one-year Masters is questioned by some influential individuals. The UK's sector wide Europe Unit will continue to make the case for the one-year Masters on the basis of the above-mentioned Helsinki agreement and with reference to the importance of learning outcomes which, to some extent, overtakes debate over programme lengths in Europe. This issue indicates however the need for increased UK HEIs involvement in the Bologna Process, to defend UK Masters.

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⁸ The Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) is an informal network for quality assurance and accreditation of bachelor and master programmes in Europe. Further information can be found at: www.jqi.org.

⁹ The Trans-national European Evaluation Project (TEEP) has been established to seek to develop a European methodology for the use of common criteria and quality assurance at European level. Further information can be found at: www.enqa.net