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Executive summary

This E-note provides a summary of research commissioned by the UK HE Europe Unit to examine the delivery of Masters degrees in continental Europe.

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'Mastering Diversity': UK HE Europe Unit report on current arrangements for Masters programmes in France, the Netherlands, Germany and Bulgaria

Introduction

1. This document examines current arrangements for delivery of Masters programmes in four Bologna Process participating countries: France, the Netherlands, Germany and Bulgaria. The document shows that there is no single continental model for the provision of Masters degrees.
2. The overview of Masters degree provision is based on the information available on individual HEI websites and is not intended to be a fully comprehensive report. The UK HE Europe Unit commissioned UCL Consultants Ltd to conduct the research for this report in 2007¹.

HE systems in the four countries

3. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs: universities, specialised higher schools and colleges) in many of the 46 Bologna Process participating countries are still in the process of implementing reforms agreed at biennial ministerial summits. The HE systems of the four countries surveyed in this document are of very different sizes.
4. While the HE systems in the surveyed countries can be said to adhere to the objectives of the Bologna Process, there is a strong stamp of national character in the way each country has gone about implementing Bologna Process reforms.

National Regulation

5. HEIs in the UK are autonomous institutions. They develop courses in accordance with their mission and are responsible for ensuring the quality of the education they provide. The HE systems in the four countries surveyed are different in that they are largely governed by national legislation.

¹ This study was designed as a desk-based survey examining the websites of HEIs in the four survey countries. The document is not fully comprehensive in that the research results were dependent on the availability and accessibility of online data, which are in some cases very detailed, and systematically organised, and in other cases not so.

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First cycle and second cycle qualifications

6. At the Bologna Process ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005, HE Ministers and stakeholders agreed to a Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FEHEA). The FEHEA is overarching and generic in nature. It has the following features:
- Three cycles (Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral level), allowing for the possibility of intermediate qualifications within national contexts
 - Generic qualifications descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes, known as the 'Dublin Descriptors'
 - Typical credit ranges for the first cycle (180-240 European Credit Transfer System [ECTS] credits) and the second cycle (90-120 ECTS credits, the minimum requirement should amount to 60 ECTS credits at second cycle level). No credit range was included for the third cycle.

Duration

7. There are clear variations in duration and workload in the Masters degrees provided through out Europe. The definition of a Masters degree is often achieved by specifying the ECTS value, but in full-time equivalent (FTE) terms. 2 year (4 semesters) Masters programmes are the most common, particularly for scientific, technical and engineering training, but there are also 1 year (2 semesters) and 1.5 years (3 semesters) Masters courses available. In a few cases duration may vary with the level of previous training and in some others with the level of previous performance. In all countries there are arrangements for undertaking Masters training on a part-time basis, although this does not apply to all Masters programmes.
- In Germany, the length for consecutive Bachelors and Masters programmes is 5 years (although this might consist of 4+1, 3+2, or 3.5+1.5 years)
 - In the Netherlands, the FTE period can be 4 or 5, or in special cases 6, years: 4+1 in *hogescholen*², but each of the combinations of 3+1, 3+2 and 4+2 in universities (4+2 for medicine, art and teaching)
 - In France, it takes 3+2 years to attain a Masters qualification, but there are several types of second cycle qualifications available
 - In Bulgaria 4 years are required for a Bachelors qualification and a minimum of 5 years to reach Masters level.

ECTS ranges

8. ECTS credits are nearly always allocated on the basis of 30 per semester, and hence 60 per fulltime year, whatever the length of the year. There are variations from this, notably in Bulgaria, and occasionally in the other countries, particularly for management degrees or degrees with unusual requirements.

² *Hogescholen* conduct applied research, but their focus is much more towards professional education compared to university education. *Hogescholen* can award Bachelors and Masters degrees. They are not allowed to be called *universiteit* in the Dutch language. In an international context, the phrase "University of Applied Science" is to be used for the majority of these schools, as suggested by the Dutch Minister of Education in early 2008.

9. In Germany, Bachelors and Masters degrees are legally defined as being between 180-240 ECTS and 60-120 ECTS respectively. In France, they are 180 ECTS and 120 ECTS respectively. In Bulgaria, where the Masters degree follows the same programme as the Bachelors degree, Masters students should have accumulated at least 300 ECTS (240 ECTS and 60 ECTS). In practice however, many Bulgarian Masters programmes are 3 semesters (90 ECTS).

Workload

10. Annual expected workload is defined by law in Germany as 1,800 hours per year (30 hours per ECTS credit) and in the Netherlands as 1,680 hours per year (28 hours per ECTS credit). Workload is not defined by law in France, although there is 'broad agreement' that 1,600 hours per year is an appropriate workload. Information available on individual programmes and their components in France and Germany is consistent with these requirements. It is more difficult to assess total expected workload in individual Bulgarian programmes but there is a general understanding that 1 ECTS credit is associated with a load of 25-30 hours.
11. Some subject areas lie outside the new Bologna Process three-cycle system. Law, medicine and theology in Germany (although in practice plenty of Masters programmes in law are offered); and medicine in France are cases in point.

Study period

12. The beginning and end of semesters do not define the student's total study period in any of these countries. Work on dissertations and projects characteristically continues after class tuition ends, just as it does in the UK. This is also frequently the case with work experience, particularly in those countries where work experience is a significant element in the overall assessment. Examinations also often fall outside the teaching semester.

Admission to Masters courses

13. In the four countries considered, admission to a Masters programme is normally permitted on the basis of a first-cycle qualification in a relevant or specified subject area. This is often a matter of right for the student, particularly when the Masters is sought in the university where the first-cycle degree was taken. Procedures also exist for considering alternative first-cycle qualifications and prior experience as appropriate qualifications for entry to a Masters course, though they tend to be more cumbersome. Universities in Germany, the Netherlands³, and sometimes in Bulgaria, increasingly require additional tests of competence before allowing admission. In France, admission to the M1 (1 year second cycle qualification often referred to an 'intermediate diploma/degree) is granted as a matter of right, while admission to the M2 (2 year Masters degree) is done through selection.

³ Admission to Masters courses for graduates of *hogescholen* and of universities are usually differentiated.



Tuition fees

14. Fee levels for Masters courses are usually considerably lower than they are in the UK, although Dutch practice is more comparable. However, high-fee programmes do exist in France, Germany and the Netherlands.

- **A full copy of the report can be found on the Europe Unit website:**
www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/MasteringDiversity.pdf

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