

The Bologna Process
Conference on Master-level Degrees
Helsinki, Finland
March 14 - 15, 2003

Conclusions and Recommendations of the Conference

Different dimensions of master degrees

(In this document the term master degree is used to describe all second-cycle higher education degrees at master level irrespective of their different national titles)

As the study made by European University Association shows most European countries have introduced or are about to introduce a higher education degree structure based on a sequence of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees.

According to this report, there is still some variety in the length of the study programmes leading to the master's degree, but there seems to be a trend towards master degrees the total extent of which is 300 ECTS credits. In practice, this usually means five years of full-time studies.

The degree structures still vary considerably between the countries taking part in the Bologna Process. In addition, the two-tier structure is still perceived differently in our respective countries. In some higher education systems, bachelor's and master's degrees are seen as clearly self-supporting entities, whereas in others, the two cycles form rather a cumulative sequence of knowledge, skills and competencies in more or less the same disciplinary area. These differences can be accommodated within the European Higher Education Area if reconciled with its objective of creating more flexibility and individual choice in higher education qualifications.

Traditionally, most higher education institutions not included in the university sector in Europe have offered bachelor degrees, and only recently have they introduced master degrees in some countries. This development serves the purpose of diversification of higher education, which is called for by European labour market needs and the increasingly heterogeneous student population.

In order to increase the transparency of qualifications earned at different types of institutions or with different profiles, all higher education institutions should make use of the

Diploma Supplement. Governments should make every effort to ensure that qualifications at the same level earned in different types of institutions enjoy, where appropriate, the same civil effect in professional life and in the pursuit of further studies.

The diversification of contents and profile of degree programmes calls for a common framework of reference of European higher education qualifications in order to increase transparency and thus to facilitate both national and international student mobility. Increasing student and teacher/staff mobility adds to cultural understanding and appreciation and promotes innovation in European higher education. Readable and comparable degree structures facilitate the professional recognition of qualifications and the mobility of labour force thus contributing to making the European labour market more dynamic for employers and graduates.

European higher education - a hallmark of excellence

Many European higher education institutions offer degree programmes designed for and marketed to international students. To serve this purpose, many institutions have chosen to develop education through widely-used foreign languages. This approach is understandable and welcome, as it increases the global attractiveness and competitiveness of higher education institutions in smaller linguistic areas. Development of the EHEA must not, however, lead to a mono-linguistic world of higher education. Within the EHEA governments and higher education institutions should make every effort to ensure teaching of the national languages to foreign students, even if the degree programme itself is in another language and proficiency in the language of the host country is not a prerequisite for admission. Multiculturalism, pluralism and linguistic skills are to remain the intrinsic values of European higher education.

Joint master degrees at the European level should become an important feature of European higher education both to promote intra-European cooperation and in order to attract talented students and researchers from other continents to study and work in Europe. Particular attention needs to be paid to introducing quality assurance mechanisms and to solving the specific recognition issues raised by joint degrees.

To serve a wider range of international students and contribute to capacity building in developing countries, the possibility of delivering European higher education through

branch campuses operated by consortia of European universities should be explored and encouraged, especially at the master's level.

Two-tier degree structure: implications for mobility

General: Steps must be taken to consolidate and increase the present volume of mobility, also for longer periods of time. In order to be able to monitor in any precise way the volumes and flows in mobility, reliable statistical data not available at present need to be produced on a regular basis. The ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in all EHEA countries would be desirable to increase mobility.

Intra-European mobility: Further growth in intra-European mobility (exchanges) presupposes a strong effort by governments and higher education institutions to consolidate and extend inter-institutional arrangements of a high quality, which will assure full recognition of periods studied and credits earned abroad. This also entails a coherent application of ECTS across the entire EHEA, as laid down in the recent "Key Features" document and the recommendations of the Zürich Conference on ECTS. National support schemes should be made portable.

With reference to intra-European degree (vertical) mobility, a strong plea is made to governments and institutions to ensure equal treatment of bachelor degrees between EHEA countries as a formal requirement for admission to master programmes.

Mobility between Europe and the world: In order to attract more students and young researchers from outside of Europe, supportive action is necessary. One such activity is the marketing of European higher education on other continents. Another is the creation of internationally attractive programmes taught in major world languages. Europe's offer of this type of education must be considerably stepped up, beyond its present modest level. Framework conditions, such as conditions for entry and residence of third-country nationals in Europe, work permits and student services, must be improved to facilitate access to European higher education.

Framework of reference for master degrees in Europe

There are various European initiatives underway today that aim at defining learning outcomes and skills and competencies both at the bachelor and master level. This will

allow capitalising on the richness of European higher education traditions and creating European profiles in the various disciplines. At the same time, the promotion of mobility in Europe requires increased transparency and comparability of European higher education qualifications. Some common criteria for the structural definition of master's degrees - in their various national names - are needed. This framework of reference should be flexible enough to allow national and institutional variations, but at the same time clear enough to serve as a definition.

The following recommendations adopted by the participants in the conference could be seen as useful common denominators for a master degree in the EHEA:

1. A master degree is a second-cycle higher education qualification. The entry to a master's programme usually requires a completed bachelor degree at a recognised higher education institution. Bachelor and master degrees should have different defined outcomes and should be awarded at different levels.

2. Students awarded a master degree must have achieved the level of knowledge and understanding, or high level in artistic competence when appropriate, which allows them to integrate knowledge, and handle complexity, formulate judgements and communicate their conclusions to an expert and to a non-expert audience.

Students with a master degree will have the learning skills needed to pursue further studies or research in a largely self-directed, autonomous manner.

3. All bachelor degrees should open access to master studies and all master degrees should give access to doctoral studies. A transition from master level to doctoral studies without the formal award of a master's degree should be considered possible if the student demonstrates that he/she has the necessary abilities.

Differences in orientation or profile of programmes should not affect the civil effect of the master degrees.

4. Bachelor and master programmes should be described on the basis of content, quality and learning outcomes, not only according to the duration of programmes or other formal characteristics.

5. There are several ongoing international projects related to developing coherent quality assurance mechanisms in the EHEA. This work should be continued, and international aspects of national and regional quality assurance systems should be further developed.

6. Joint master programmes at the European level should be developed to promote intra-European cooperation and attract talented students and re-

searchers from other continents to study and work in Europe. Particular attention must be paid to solving recognition problems related to joint degrees.

7. While master degree programmes normally carry 90 - 120 ECTS credits, the minimum requirements should amount to 60 ECTS credits 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.

8. 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.

9. Programmes leading to a master degree may have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. Master degrees can be taken at universities and in some countries, in other higher education institutions.

10. In order to increase transparency it is important that the specific orientation and profile of a given qualification is explained in the Diploma Supplement issued to the student.