

# The changing landscape of master's degree curricula: a view from New Zealand

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## Abstract

Until recently, master's degrees were primarily focused on developing research skills and enabling further specialisation in a subject area studied at undergraduate level. Over the last twenty years their focus has broadened and there is now a wide variety of master's degrees, partly as a result of increasing participation in higher education and also because of the demand for professional qualifications at postgraduate level. Alongside this, not only has there been significant growth in the numbers of master's qualifications, but also increasing variation in terms of the focus of the curriculum and, the volume of work required for completion of the degree. As Davies (2009) so fittingly comments, this variety of modes and purposes gives the master's degree 'a polymorphous character, which is not yet well charted' (p.17). Taking a qualitative approach and using documentary analysis of selected qualifications frameworks and related documentation, this paper explores changing nature of master's degrees and how their characteristics are represented in qualifications frameworks in New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and Europe. Traditionally, the majority of New Zealand master's degrees have been classified as research degrees. We will examine the recent changes to master's degrees in New Zealand, and discuss these in relation to master's qualifications elsewhere, highlighting key features and differences, including those related to curriculum structures.

Keywords: master's degrees; qualification structures; postgraduate research and coursework; curriculum studies.

## 1 Introduction

The master's degree has undergone significant transformation in the last twenty years; its original focus on advanced or specialised study in a discipline studied at undergraduate level combined with developing research skills (McInnis, James & Morris, 1995) has widened to encompass professional practice, or conversion to a new discipline (Davies, 2009). Master's degrees are often being completed as terminal qualifications for career entry or enhancement rather than as preparation for doctoral research (Conrad, Haworth & Millar, 1993; Rogers, 2008). It is evident in a number of countries that coursework (taught) master's degrees have experienced exponential growth. For example, coursework master's completions in Australia increased from around 25,000 to 68,000 (172%) from 2000 to 2011 (Australian Government Statistics, 2013); likewise in the UK there was 156% growth in taught master's over this period (HESA, 2013).

The variation in purpose of master's degrees has led to different curriculum structures, delivery modes and duration of the qualification. As Davies (2009) comments, the variety of modes and purposes gives the master's degree 'a polymorphous character, which is not yet well charted' (p.17). One mechanism for defining and classifying qualifications such as master's degrees is a qualification framework (QF). Overarching national qualification frameworks (NQF) are a relatively new phenomenon in most European countries (Ulicna & Coles, 2011) but have existed for more than twenty years in NZ and Australia. There are five QFs in use in the UK, with the earliest one being the Scottish framework which was based on reforms introduced first in the 1980s (Raffe, 2009). These frameworks were initially designed to classify academic and/or vocational qualifications in a hierarchical system within the home country or region, but are now being mapped against each other or to a meta-framework such as the 2005 Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher education Area (FQ-EHEA) and/or the European Qualifications Framework

(EQF). The EQF was developed in 2008 and is closely aligned to the FQ-HEA; both aim to support student mobility and portability of qualifications (Bjørnåvold, 2007; Cort, 2010).

In addition to a communicative role some QFs are designed to direct policy, such as the FQ-EHEA which seeks to 'harmonise systems' (Bjørnåvold, 2007, p. 9) or act as 'regulatory devices' (Blackmur 2004, p. 267). The desire for greater recognition of qualifications beyond national boundaries and political agendas has in many cases strengthened the position of these frameworks. For example, in Australia, the establishment of Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in 2011 has reinforced the Australian Qualification Framework's (AQF) role in regulation by requiring that higher education providers and their programmes meet the corresponding specifications in the AQF level descriptors by 2015 (TEQSA, 2013) which are an inherent part of the broader Threshold Standards. In this way a QF can act as a powerful influence in the development and reform of qualifications or systems (Bjørnåvold & Coles, 2010).

A number of studies have critiqued specific NQFs (see Allais 2007, Fernie & Pilcher, 2009; Isopahkala-Bouret, Rantanen, Raij & Järveläinen, 2011) or have provided a more general critique of QFs (see Blackmur 2004, Cort, 2010). Whilst acknowledging that there are shortcomings and issues with QFs, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these further. This paper examines how master's degrees are represented in the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF), AQF, The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and the European meta-frameworks (EQF and FQ-EHEA); in particular, to examine how these individual frameworks 'chart' particular characteristics of master's degrees.

## **2 Approach to the Study**

The focus of this study was on master's degrees and how they are presented at a macro level in policy or guidance documents, regulations for qualifications or reports. Document analysis is underpinned by a qualitative approach (Silverman, 2005) and is particularly suited to gaining insights into policy or systems. As mentioned above QFs and their associated documents are not neutral as they are often intended to support or drive change (Cort, 2010). QFs and associated guidance documents also aim to communicate essential features of qualifications to ensure compatibility of meaning within and across systems. For these reasons a documentary method was chosen.

Key elements to be investigated and compared in the five selected QFs outlined above had been identified from a larger study involving a survey of all NZ university master's degrees and their structures in relation to the NZQF. A documentary analysis was undertaken of the QFs and any associated guidance documents, supported by a literature search of articles and reports related to master's degrees and the selected QFs.

## **3 Forms of master's degree**

Master's degrees are categorised in the NZQF into three types: 'by thesis', primarily comprising an extended research study in the form of a thesis, dissertation or creative output and exegesis; 'by coursework', largely made up of taught papers, and therefore also referred to as 'taught', and, 'by coursework and thesis' (NZQA, 2011, p. 22). In Australia, three forms described in the AQF are 'research', 'coursework' or 'extended' (AQF Council, 2013). The master's degree categories are not so definitively described in the FHEQ but there is reference to three broad categories: 'research', 'specialised/advanced study' and 'professional/practice' master's in related guidance document produced by the QAA (2010). In the UK master's degrees are also referred to as 'taught,' 'research' or 'integrated'. Integrated refers to those degrees that combine undergraduate and postgraduate study within the one qualification. The outcome descriptor for Cycle 2 (FQ-HEA) and related Dublin descriptor for master's degrees is broad enough to encapsulate a wide range of master's degrees.

## **4 Focus of the curriculum**

The size of the research component, or its relative size in proportion to taught credits, generally determines whether a master's degree is referred to as a research degree in the NZQF, AQF and UK. Degrees of this type are academically oriented and provide preparation for further research or doctoral study. A research master's under the

NZQF definition has a research project or thesis of 90 points (45 ECTS) or 120 points (60 ECTS) whereas the AQF requires two thirds of a research master's to comprise research. In the UK, a code of practice for the quality assurance of postgraduate qualifications (QAA 2004, p. 4) defines a research master's as one 'where the research component is larger than the taught component when measured by student effort [learning hours]'. The size or nature of the research component, or what is a research degree is not detailed in the FQ-EHEA or related documentation. Few national QFs of countries in other parts of Europe distinguish a research from a coursework degree, rather they may set minimum requirements for the dissertation, as in Norway for example (refer Amundsen, 2006).

Coursework master's degrees are made up of a structured learning programme consisting primarily of taught papers. They may include a dissertation, research project or other type of individualised study, however in most cases these make up a small component of the overall degree. A coursework master's may build on an undergraduate discipline or subject area, or have a professional focus. Professional master's often have a more interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary approach to the curriculum and aim to enhance a student's knowledge and skills in a particular career field. Another type of coursework degree that is gaining popularity is a conversion masters. These are aimed at people who want to practice in a field unrelated to their undergraduate study. Conversion master's have been positioned at postgraduate level but may include undergraduate level courses in some countries. Unlike the AQF and NZQF, the FHEQ and FQ-HEA allow for some credits to be at undergraduate level within a master's degree.

## 5 Volume of learning

The length or duration of a master's degree varies depending on one or more factors, such as prior related qualifications, nature of the master's or field of study. The QFs encompass this by providing either a range or minimum credit requirements. NZ recently introduced a 180-credit (90 ECTS) master's degree that allows entry on the basis of a three-year bachelor's degree (Universities NZ, 2012). This change was prompted by the NZ universities and led to changes to the NZQF master's definition. Prior to 2012 all master's degrees needed to fit into a five-year overall period of study beginning with the undergraduate degree. The FQ-HEA requires a minimum of 60 ECTS credits at Cycle 2 and QAA documentation indicates that 150-120 credits at level 7 is required in the UK for master's degrees. The dominant model in England is a 12-month master's (90 ECTS) following a three-year degree and this model is attractive especially to international students. In Australia, master's degrees are expected by the AQF to differentiate the length of time required to complete the degree on the basis of whether the subject area in the undergraduate qualification is in a cognate area or not. If it is not in a cognate area an additional 6 months (30 ECTS) are required over the equivalent of 90 ECTS credits.

The AQF and NZQF distinguish master's level learning from that in postgraduate certificates or diplomas, which may be embedded or stand-alone qualifications in England, Australia and New Zealand. The coursework or taught courses are usually shared between these qualifications and a related master's degree. The related qualifications are less common elsewhere and this is evident from the meta-framework documentation and individual country responses to the EQF implementation. The NZQF and AQF differentiate the learning on the basis of higher-level outcomes expected from some courses within the master's degree, whereas the FHEQ differentiates on the basis of overall volume of learning for each award (QAA, 2010. p. 10).

## 6 Discussion

In different ways the QFs are influential in driving changes in qualifications or qualification systems. More European countries now offer 120 ECTS stand-alone master's degrees and a growing share of students are enrolled in the two cycle system (EHEA, 2012). Educational entrepreneurs are seizing the opportunity to introduce a variety of master's programmes to attract and accommodate a more diverse range of students and their learning needs. The master's degree has become perhaps the most marketable qualification in higher education and the professional master's, in particular, has become an economic generator for universities often strengthening their links with industry (Brandt, 2002; Laredo, 2007).

All QFs have broad descriptors that encompass the different types of master's degrees however the AQF, followed by the NZQF, go further in defining the requirements of the different types of master's degrees. The European meta-frameworks and FHEQ supporting documents stress that the respective QFs are not intended to be restrictive in terms of forms of master's. However, the QAA have provided supporting documentation that further

elaborates on the variety of master's degrees in response to requests for greater clarity (2010, p. 2). A binary system of higher education with distinct vocational and academic pathways exists in several European countries and this means that the different forms of master's degrees are not just related to nature of the curriculum but also the type of institution and/or title of degrees e.g. Norway (Brandt, 2002), Netherlands (Dittrich, Frederiks & Luwel, 2004), Finland (Isopahkala-Bouret *et al.*, 2011). This adds further complexity in determining equivalence, recognition and pathways into and out of master's degrees.

## 7 Conclusion

There is variation in how the features of master's degrees that influence the curriculum models are charted in various QFs and supporting documentation, though we acknowledge that this is not necessarily the primary purpose of QFs and that their roles vary. Further meta-frameworks like the FQ-EHEA or EQF are decoded differently dependent on the national context and the extent to which these QFs align with existing reforms or even priorities of institutions or academic departments (Sin, 2012). The selected NQFs or associated documentation elaborate on the different types of master's degrees and in the case of NZQF and AQF, set requirements. There is some evidence that once a QF is in place it can morph from a mapping tool that records practice into a guide to practice, or even over time convert practice into definitions or protocols governing qualifications such as master's degrees.

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