

What is mastersness?

Discussion paper
July 2013

Report of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee
Learning from International Practice
The Postgraduate Taught Student Experience Working Group

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Introduction

This short discussion paper is one of the outcomes from the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) project 'Learning from International Practice: The Postgraduate Taught Student Experience'. The project has been managed on behalf of SHEEC by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland. Prepared in discussion with staff and students in Scottish, other UK and international higher education institutions - and containing their thoughts and comments - it examines the concept of 'mastersness'¹ and has also been cross-referenced to case study examples of practice designed to inculcate this.²

We hope that colleagues will be able to use the facets of mastersness we have identified and developed to reflect upon their learning and teaching practices and the content of the postgraduate taught courses they offer. Further details about the comprehensive process of research, thought, discussion and iteration leading up to the preparation of this paper are given in the annexes. Further details about the project, including the full case studies, are available on the project website.³

This paper is by no means the last word on the matter, so it has been titled a 'discussion paper'. It is being released into the public domain, where we hope colleagues will find it a useful contribution.

A framework for considering mastersness

Making sense of all the dimensions of mastersness is a complex task.

We have developed a simple framework to assist us in exploring all the elements, both conceptually and practically, and in a manner that is consonant with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) but goes beyond it (see Annex B). Our framework is presented in diagrammatic form opposite. Each 'facet' is an aspect that the Postgraduate Taught Student Experience Working Group thinks underpins the concept of 'mastersness'. Of course, not all facets will be represented equally or to the same extent in a module or programme - they will be blended as appropriate.



Figure 1: Facets of mastersness

¹ We readily acknowledge the clumsiness of the term 'mastersness', and that it should properly contain an apostrophe as does 'master's'. However, for our purposes, it succinctly encapsulates what we are trying to discuss/achieve.

² A workshop, 'What is mastersness...?', held as part of the project on 30 November 2012 was particularly helpful, and many of the quotes from lecturers cited here come from this workshop.

³ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience. Our model was developed using work carried out in New Zealand by Warring (2011).

Master's study

The context and dimensions of the master's experience (for example subject, type of course and student background) matter. Master's study, like any, is a journey - and the attributes of mastership are transmitted/acquired during that journey. Overall, the student body is highly diverse (who they are, where they start from, what else they have done or are doing), and this is often reflected in master's student cohorts. O'Donnell et al (2009)⁴ found that 'postgraduates are a diverse group, with different levels of ability in terms of academic practices, and varying degrees of familiarity with the skills necessary for success at postgraduate level in higher education'. Lecturers agree it is crucial to acknowledge the implications of this for postgraduates' ability to acquire the necessary skills and attributes. They will each do this at their own pace. As one tutor said in one of the project workshops: 'as a tutor you have to ask yourself, what is their provenance and what else are they doing?' and adapt accordingly because - of course - although some students will develop master's attributes faster than others, the aim is that they all achieve them by the end.

Related to this, lecturers report that helping to get all students to the required end point - in what is often a single year - can make for a very pressurised experience. Extended time is often needed for reflection; thus, while full-time study offers the advantage of intensity, there may be less time for reflection. On the other hand, master's courses often facilitate this by being part-time/studied while also in practice. Timescales can be a challenge to achieving the full range of master's outcomes.

In some aspects of the facets we discuss in this paper, our discussions revealed that there might be very little distinction between the achievements of students at undergraduate and at master's level. Strong undergraduate students are capable of and do the sorts of things that are expected routinely of master's students - but these are the exceptional undergraduate students. Where they apply, the facets we are describing here are an **expectation** at master's level.

The facets of mastership

Below, we consider the key aspects of master's-level study, in some detail, using the facets summarised above. The definitions given in the box at the start of each section have been devised by the project working group. The discussion about each facet incorporates a section on challenges for practice. These have been linked to our parallel work in identifying and collecting case studies, some of which provide scenarios in which these challenges have been addressed.

⁴ O'Donnell, V, Tobbell, J, Lawthom, R and Zammit, M (2009) Transition to postgraduate study: practice, participation and the widening participation agenda, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, vol 10, pp 26-40, available at: <http://alh.sagepub.com/content/10/1/26> (last accessed 24 July 2013)

1 Level of complexity

Complexity: recognising and dealing with complexity of knowledge - including provisionality, the integration of knowledge and skills, application of knowledge in practice - conceptual complexity, and complexity of learning process.

Master's study helps learners become conscious...of the limits to their competence - no-one is ever fully competent. (Lecturer, workshop)

Our discussions with staff and students revealed that complexity at master's level is manifested in a number of ways. There is the intrinsic conceptual complexity of SCQF level 11 in the sense of study being more complex than at undergraduate level. Complexity can be content-related, for example:

- students may be asked to work on complex, real-life problems
- students may need to appreciate different world views, including from those working in the field and from fellow students or clients
- research and enquiry is a key differentiator at master's level (see section 4) and thus another manifestation of complexity.

However, master's-level study is about more than just 'advanced knowledge'. Assessment at this level goes beyond just measuring higher level learning skills, to include demonstrating ability/knowledge of how to use or apply such skills to address problems or test original hypotheses. Perhaps the clue is in the title: with master's study, the principal idea is that, by the end, the student should be sufficiently expert in the field to hold their own with those with more advanced knowledge, skills and experience - be that in a professional peer-to-peer context, compared with academic staff, or in life. This includes having an awareness of the provisionality of knowledge, described to us as 'being aware that there are things you do not know', or that what one thinks one knows may not always remain unchanged. It also incorporates tendencies towards originality: the master's graduate will not be following instructions, but making something new.

As discussed above, context is key when considering the nature of master's study and this gives rise to additional complexities. Master's level draws particularly on the experience of peers and self. Since master's students come from a variety of backgrounds, and bring with them a range of experiences, this also leads to complexities in the learning process.

Challenges for practice include:

- how to design assessment to deal adequately with complexity?

2 Degree of abstraction

Abstraction: extracting knowledge or meanings from sources and then using these to construct new knowledge or meanings.

We encountered some debate about whether all master's programmes involve abstraction. Nonetheless, we concluded that the ability to handle and create abstraction is important for many master's courses - arguably all - even in those that may seem as though they have a narrow or very vocational focus.

Abstraction also concerns applying what has been learned to a different domain or situation. Related to this, the ability to deconstruct is important to master's-level study, and this includes the ability to take apart the complex and reassemble it in a different - more fitting - way, or to make something new and better. Abstraction and deconstruction may take many different forms. As Biggs and Collis (1982, cited in Atherton⁵) have it: 'at the extended abstract level, the student is making connections not only within the given subject area, but also beyond it, able to generalise and transfer the principles and ideas underlying the specific instance'.

Challenges for practice include:

- how can we teach abstraction?
- how much abstraction and conceptualisation is it reasonable to expect of particular students?
- how to encourage autonomous learning about abstraction processes?

3 Depth of learning in a subject

Depth of learning: acquiring more knowledge and using knowledge differently - for example, engaging in a narrow topic in depth, engaging in up-to-date research, or taking a multidisciplinary approach and examining something familiar and presenting it in a new, innovative way.

Depth of study, for the purpose of knowing more, can be a feature of learning at master's level; this can be achieved through, for example, exploring narrow topics in depth or engagement with up-to-date research, or taking a multidisciplinary approach and looking at the same thing in different ways. However, when comparing undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes, depth of knowledge may not always be significantly different. As with complexity (section 1), at postgraduate level, depth of learning is not only about knowledge, but also its use and practice: it relates to how the student goes about the practical or theoretical application of knowledge. This includes applying knowledge to new situations, and reflecting on the outcomes.

Acquiring the right level of criticality is therefore also part of depth of study. Master's students may acquire deep knowledge which contextualises other information. They are expected to engage in reflection and think about their knowledge and understanding within the wider picture, and should be, as one lecturer put it, 'recognising complexity in simplicity' and vice versa.

This approach to using knowledge can manifest itself tangibly in the way that students regard the master's dissertation. Postgraduate students often consider it to be an expression of their learning: practice as a form of depth.

Thus, depth is a feature of master's-level study. This might or might not mean depth of knowledge or study, but will definitely require a deeper application of knowledge and depth of thinking.

Challenges for practice include:

- what are the implications for depth-related learning outcomes of students starting from very different places - especially for skills and competency-based master's programmes?
- how can the students' different background experiences be taken into account?
- how to overcome the issue in conversion master's programmes where students transferring from one subject area to another may not feel embedded enough in the subject?

⁵ Atherton, J S (2011) Writing at Master's Level, *Doceo*, available at: www.doceo.co.uk/academic/m_writing.htm (last accessed 24 July 2013)

4 Salience of research and enquiry

Research and enquiry: developing critical research and enquiry skills and attributes.

From hunter-gatherer to Masterchef? (Lecturer, workshop)

Our discussions revealed that there is a wide range of views as to whether mastersness - in the context of a research-specific skill set - is more of the same or something qualitatively different from that expected at SCQF level 10. We concluded that it is probably a combination of both: more critical analysis, deeper understanding and level of abstraction, extension of knowledge; but also qualitatively different in the sense that demonstrable ownership and leadership is often expected in terms of the research produced.

Regardless of the discipline, mastersness can be considered identifiable by the scale, intensity and complexity of research in comparison to that expected at SCQF level 10. The master's-level student population uses a much wider span of research techniques and methods. Students also have greater control over the actual research, being involved in defining and planning the work.

Within vocational work, there is a greater link between the theoretical and the practical - research as praxis. In fields such as Nursing, Midwifery, Education and Career Guidance, for example, this does not necessarily mean an enhancement of research quality at master's level, but rather it manifests itself as service improvement. For other subjects, however - particularly in the humanities - this is not the case, as it is anticipated that research quality will be considerably enhanced by the planning and execution of a significant body of research.

A significant level of responsibility is expected in terms of the student's own learning and skill development and moving beyond the literature towards independent thought. For practice-led subjects, a sense of professionalism is expected and an ability to handle unpredictability in an operational context (see section 6).

Challenges for practice include:

- how to demystify the term 'research' to take account of the different kinds of research in different master's programmes?

5 Degree of learner autonomy and responsibility

Autonomy: taking responsibility for own learning in terms of self-organisation, motivation, location and acquisition of knowledge.

Master's students should be drivers, not passengers. (Lecturer, workshop)

You cannot expect autonomy on day 1 - but it is what you are aiming for.
(Lecturer, workshop)

At master's level, their knowledge should not be bounded by yours. (Lecturer, workshop)

Autonomy encompasses a range of attributes which are encouraged/nurtured/developed/brought out by master's study. As with other master's-level skills, but particularly with autonomy, these take time to acquire. Learner autonomy is an expectation at postgraduate level. Academic staff characterised the distinction as: 'at undergraduate level, autonomy is directed; at master's level it is left up to them, far more, what they want to do'.

Students themselves⁶ perceive the differences between undergraduate and master's study to include a shift of responsibility from the teacher to the learner - lecturers provide direction, with students following up on this with their own study/research. There also tends to be more interaction between staff and students and between students themselves. At this level, students take more responsibility for their own learning and need to be self-motivated. SCQF level 11 is partly defined by this student capacity for self-learning. In discussion, lecturers said: 'we tend to push undergraduate students; at master's level, they do their own nudging'.

Master's students need to find the knowledge for themselves and fill in gaps. They identify for themselves what **they** need to know about - in general and certainly to complete their dissertation. Lecturers told us: 'we expect undergraduate students to use the materials we give them effectively, but we expect postgraduate taught students to seek out other materials and sources and go beyond what we're telling them'. Master's students should bring in other materials, including 'things I've never read'.

Undergraduate students are learning to understand and apply techniques. At master's level, they are expected to question those techniques and, lecturers think, 'bring something of themselves to their studies'. As such, master's students may also be less concerned with facts and details and more with issues. A key aspect is in being able to identify and conceptualise a problem, and use skills in searching the literature and compiling an evidence base, critically evaluating sources, synthesising the information, and creating and developing new viewpoints.

As with all levels of study, students are key to the learning and teaching experience at master's level. Bringing out and using their experiences is crucial. There are firm expectations regarding co-constructing learning, and valuing and using the learner's experiences - including current work and professional experience - in the curriculum. Students and lecturers often work in partnership at master's level. Master's learning is often collaborative - both with tutors but also, crucially, with each other. The other students are an important resource at master's level, perhaps working together autonomously of lecturers.

Confidence is an important aspect. Master's students should be confident enough to both question accepted practice and to be realistic about what they know and what they do not know - when they need to seek guidance. An important dimension of this, lecturers said, is that they need to 'know the limits of their knowledge' and also to keep going when things go wrong for them.

Challenges for practice include:

- students often have no clear view of what autonomy is - how do we facilitate this?
- students often think the independent study aspect of master's is 'easy' but actually it is very hard - how to handle this?
- how do we 'help them to become drivers'?

6 Complexity and unpredictability in an operational context

Unpredictability: dealing with unpredictability in operational contexts - recognising that 'real world' problems are by their nature 'messy' and complex, and being creative with the use of knowledge and experience to solve these problems.

Postgraduate students need to gain an awareness of the provisionality of knowledge and of the world (epistemology and ontology - even if we do not always use those terms), and be able to reflect on those, and their own position within the discipline or profession, and use their

⁶ Focus group with postgraduate taught students, November 2012.

knowledge accordingly. Professional practice is key at master's level and this is as relevant to academic subjects as it is to more vocational subjects. Successful master's students should be able to problematise practice. In discussion, lecturers said that they should be able to reflect on practice and say what went well and what went less well.

In practical terms, master's programmes can involve real life experience, for example working on newly discovered historical manuscripts, simulations, live client projects or with external facilitators from the field who set problems. The problems and range of people are more complex for postgraduate than for undergraduate studies. Real world examples for postgraduate case studies are longer, more complex, requiring more advanced independent thinking, and with students coming to a tutorial with a proposed solution (although there is often not just one solution). Furthermore, postgraduate students do not just solve the problem, they define and/or anticipate it. Master's students start to see practice situated within a larger context, for example national policy, laws or historical context. Their purpose is to make links between these elements.

Master's students are expected and, importantly, **trusted** to work and cope with uncertainty.

Challenges for practice include:

- master's students learn to work with complexity, but real world clients often want 'a solution', and someone who can 'do the job' - how do we help students acquire a balanced approach?
- how do we help students to feel comfortable acknowledging unpredictability and to gain the confidence to work through it?

7 Professionalism

Professionalism: displaying appropriate professional attitudes, behavior and values in whatever discipline/occupational area is chosen (from academic to occupational subjects), including learning ethical behaviours, developing academic integrity, dealing with challenges to professionalism, recognising the need to reflect on practice, and becoming part of a discipline/occupational community.

Professionalism came through very strongly in our discussions as another of the key dimensions of mastersness - so much so that we made it a facet in its own right. By doing so, we do not mean to imply that master's graduates will necessarily exit with formal professional status (although some will). Rather, that master's-level study involves 'becoming' part of a community or culture, whether in academe or in other professions. Master's students are on the cusp of the line of becoming peers rather than being students. They take on more responsibility (for example, in Music, master's students may play alongside undergraduates in orchestras, but master's students will take the lead). They start to develop a level of confidence in their knowledge, including appreciating what they do not know. Context is key and this involves getting the students to identify the characteristics of their professional context - actively embracing values, ethics and accountability - and work within it.

Challenges for practice include:

- master's students are often quite expert in their own professional field but novices when it comes to academic study - how to balance the theory/practice gap?

Taking it forward

We find that the seven facets of mastersness often interrelate closely (for example, depth and complexity of operational context, or complexity of study and professionalism) and it is the **blend** of the different elements that makes it master's level. In addition, we readily acknowledge that different kinds of master's programmes or courses have different purposes. It follows that not all master's programmes will encompass all of the seven facets to the same extent or level (for example abstraction) - they will be blended differently in different programmes.

Some of the facets are better developed in this paper than others because, we think, colleagues grasp and are comfortable with some more than others. We do not intend this paper to be prescriptive. Our aim is that academic staff will use it, and the other tools we develop during the project, to consider mastersness in their own contexts. For example, the basic concepts (suitably explained) could be used in induction with students to prepare them for master's-level study or in preparing them for assessment. Programme teams could use them when developing new master's-level courses. To this end, colleagues must feel free to adapt and augment the materials we have produced to suit their own circumstances.

Pointers for practice

This section provides some concrete examples of established practice - developed, adopted and used by practitioners in higher education - to support mastersness. The list refers to case studies identified and collected by the project, supplied by institutions using a case study template. They have been organised using the chronology of the student journey: getting there, settling there, being there, staying there, moving on from there (Lines 2013).⁷ We have conflated 'getting/settling there' and 'being/staying there' as we think this suits the master's student's (rather shorter) journey better. The detailed case studies can be found on the project website.

| Transition to master's-level study: Summary of case study themes ⁸ | | |
|---|---|--------------------|
| Practice | Activity/subject | Case study links |
| Getting there/ settling there | Orienting international students | 7, 8, 12 |
| | Developing student confidence at outset | 5 |
| | Getting diverse groups of students to the same level | 10 |
| | Meeting diverse needs | 13 |
| | Securing immediate engagement at master's level | 18 |
| | Research: Transition arrangements for postgraduate students | 23 |
| Being there/ staying there | Ensuring subject breadth at master's level | 14 |
| | Integrating disciplines at master's level | 15 |
| | Creating research teams and belonging | 19 |
| | Encouraging communication amongst distance learning Master's students | 22 |
| | Materials: Writing - What makes it master's? | 1 |
| | Research: Establishing and using networks | 11 |
| | Research: Activity-led learning for PGT students | 16 |
| Moving on from there | Real-world application of knowledge | 2, 3, 4, 9, 21, 24 |
| | Instilling professionalism | 6 |
| | Understanding professional context and reflection | 17 |
| | Curriculum development for practitioners | 20 |
| | Research: Pathways to PhD in Australia | 25 |

⁷ Lines, D (2013) *Guide to the Outcome of the Themes*, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes-outcomes-guide (last accessed 24 July 2013)

⁸ These case studies are those approved at the time of printing. These and subsequent case studies are available on the project website: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience.

Contacting the project

Please contact us using the details below. The project team is actively seeking case studies in mastersness, which can be submitted using our case study template.

Project Manager:

Heather Gibson h.gibson@qaa.ac.uk

Project website:

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience

Annex A: The project's work on 'mastersness'

This short discussion paper is one of the outcomes from the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) project 'Learning from International Practice: The Postgraduate Taught Student Experience'. The project has been managed on behalf of SHEEC by QAA Scotland. The work has been undertaken by the project working group, in discussion with staff and students in Scottish, other UK and international higher education institutions, and contains their thoughts and comments.

This dialogue has been effected through four national workshops, a focus group with students, proof of concept testing sessions in a university and with a group of visiting international colleagues, a project blog, and email iterations. To date, the project has engaged over 400 academic practitioners face to face and a further 100 via a mailbase wider consultative group comprising a community of self-nominated members.

The paper examines the concept of 'mastersness' and cites examples of practice designed to inculcate this, drawn from short, emblematic case studies that we have identified and captured.⁹ Further details about the project are available on the project website.¹⁰

The project arose from a widespread perception that some focused attention on postgraduate taught students would yield practical benefits. Of course, this paper is by no means the last word on the matter, but we hope that colleagues will be able to use the facets of mastersness we have identified and developed to reflect upon learning and teaching practices and on the content of the postgraduate taught courses they offer. We hope that by stimulating thinking and bringing greater clarity to the nature of mastersness, postgraduate taught master's provision in Scotland will be enhanced. This thinking is being supported by practice collected from Scotland and beyond to help colleagues - particularly in Scotland but also those elsewhere - relate the concepts to their own practice and consider new ways of doing things.

Our aim is that academic staff will use this paper, and the other tools we develop during the project, to consider mastersness in their own contexts. For example, the basic concepts could be used in induction with students to prepare them for master's-level study or in preparing them for assessment. Programme teams could use them when developing new master's-level courses. To this end, colleagues should feel free to adapt and augment the materials we produce to suit their own circumstances.

We are calling this paper a 'discussion paper'. It is being released into the public domain, where we hope colleagues will find it useful.

What is master's level?

Following two workshops to scope the issues and focus of the project, we decided to focus on the master's level, while appreciating that this covers a wide range of different types of postgraduate taught courses on offer at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 11,¹¹ including, among others:

- taught master's degrees: extension, conversion, vocational
- postgraduate certificates and diplomas

⁹ A workshop, 'What is mastersness...?', held as part of the project on 30 November 2012, was particularly helpful, and many of the quotes from lecturers cited here come from this workshop.

¹⁰ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience

¹¹ Broadly equivalent to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* level 7, Dublin Descriptors second cycle, and European Qualifications Framework level 7.

- Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), Master of Business Administration (MBA), and so on
- professional courses
- credit-bearing modules.

Taught master's is the largest section of the UK postgraduate taught sector, but even these programmes 'vary enormously in terms of their function and intended outcomes' (Higher Education Policy Institute 2004¹²). We acknowledge that 'the landscape for master's degrees in the UK is flexible and diverse' (QAA 2010¹³) and differs from much of the rest of Europe by, for example, being explicitly postgraduate. Since it is the predominant postgraduate taught qualification, our work focused on master's level (and often master's programmes) - hence 'mastersness' - but we believe much of what we have found applies usefully to other postgraduate taught provision, including the postgraduate taught element of research master's programmes. In addition, in Scotland there are some SCQF level 10 qualifications that are labeled 'master's', but these are essentially first degree qualifications and are not included here.

An obvious place for us to start when asking 'what is mastersness?' is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF): master's study is SCQF level 11. However, the distinctions between SCQF levels 10 (final year undergraduate) and 11 are, deliberately and properly, not precisely delineated by nouns and verbs (see Annex B).¹⁴ This is also largely the case with the distinctions made in the Dublin Descriptors between first and second cycle higher education. The context in which master's-level attributes are fostered, and the combination and degree to which they are required, have an important bearing. The SCQF and Dublin Descriptors, then, are a useful starting point but, for our purposes, need to be augmented. We concluded that we would have to delve deeper into the elements that 'make it 'master's'.

A framework for considering mastersness

Making sense of all the dimensions of mastersness is a complex task. We developed a simple framework to assist us in exploring all the elements, both conceptually and practically, and in a manner that is consonant with the SCQF, but goes beyond it.

Our typology was developed using work carried out in New Zealand by Susan Warring, which we adapted for the purposes of the project. Warring (2011) analysed learning levels within and between a degree and a diploma. The literature review she conducted for the study identified various hierarchies of learning. After analysing these hierarchies and considering several qualifications frameworks, Warring distilled a series of categories. We agreed, with some adjustment and subsequent detailed amplification, that these would form a useful basis for this project in considering mastersness.

A literature review and content analysis of National Qualifications Frameworks reveals that learning levels are differentiated by level of complexity, degree of abstraction, depth in a major subject, research competency, learner autonomy and responsibility, relative demand placed on students and increasing complexity and unpredictability of operational context.¹⁵

¹² Higher Education Policy Institute (2004) *Postgraduate Education in the United Kingdom*, available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/466-1764/postgraduate-education-in-the-uk.html (last accessed 24 July 2013)

¹³ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2010) *Master's degree characteristics*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/masters-degree-characteristics.aspx (last accessed 24 July 2013)

¹⁴ SCQF Level Descriptors, August 2012: 'the SCQF Level Descriptors should be seen as a useful guide to be used with other reference documents such as subject benchmarks, arrangements documents and other relevant programmes on the Framework'.

¹⁵ Warring, S (2011) An analysis of learning levels within and between a degree and a diploma: New Zealand case study, *Quality Assurance in Education*, vol 19, issue 4, p 441

We amended some of the terms in this list to better suit our purposes. In addition, Warring does not allow a specific category for 'professionalism', which was identified by our discussions with the sector as crucial to provision at master's level (as an academic or employment-related skill), so we added this to our list. On the other hand, Warring's 'relative demand placed on students' seemed to us to apply to each of the other categories as a distinguishing feature of mastersness relative to undergraduate level. We have, therefore, not given it prominence but kept it in mind when identifying case study practice.

The SCQF is presented in diagrammatic form and formed the basis for detailed discussions about the composition of each facet, outlined in the discussion paper. Each 'facet' is an aspect that the working group thinks underpins the concept of 'mastersness', and our work involved extensive discussion to define their components. Of course, not all facets will be equally represented to the same extent in a module or programme: they will be blended as appropriate.

Annex B: The SCQF and mastersness

An obvious place for us to start when asking 'what is mastersness?' was the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF): master's study is SCQF level 11. However, as can be seen from the comparative analysis below, the distinctions between SCQF levels 10 (final year undergraduate) and 11 are, deliberately and properly, not precisely delineated by nouns and verbs.¹⁶ This is also largely the case with the distinctions made in the Dublin Descriptors between first and second cycle higher education. The context in which the facets of mastersness are fostered, and the combination and degree to which they are required, have an important bearing. The SCQF and Dublin Descriptors, then, are a useful starting point but, for our purposes, needed to be augmented. We concluded that we would have to delve deeper into the elements that 'make it master's'.

Key:

The appropriate SCQF characteristics are identified, in brackets, after each statement.

C1: Knowledge and understanding

C2: Practice: applied knowledge, skills and understanding

C3: Generic cognitive skills

C4: Communication (ICT and numeracy skills are not included here)

C5: Autonomy, accountability and working with others

Text in *italics* denotes text which is qualifying the similar sounding activity at level 10 (for example *some*, *under guidance*) or level 11 (for example *wide and often*, *range of*).

Text in **red bold** denotes new verbs and adjectives which apply to level 11 only.

Text in **black bold** denotes common verbs and adjectives between the two levels.

| Considering mastersness | | |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Facets of mastersness | SCQF level 10 | SCQF level 11 |
| Complexity | critically identify, define, conceptualise and analyse complex/professional problems and issues (C3) | apply critical analysis , evaluation, and synthesis to forefront issues or issues <i>informed by forefront developments</i> (C3) |
| | critically review and consolidate knowledge, skills, practices and thinking (C3) | critically review , consolidate and extend knowledge, skills, practices and thinking (C3) |
| Abstraction | work with others to bring about change, development and/or new thinking (C5) | demonstrate leadership and/or initiative and make an identifiable contribution to change and development and/or new thinking (C5) |
| | | critical understanding of a <i>range of specialised</i> theories concepts and principles (C1) |

¹⁶ SCQF Level Descriptors, August 2012: 'the SCQF Level Descriptors should be seen as a useful guide to be used with other reference documents such as subject benchmarks, arrangements documents and other relevant programmes on the Framework'.

| Considering mastersness | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Facets of mastersness | SCQF level 10 | SCQF level 11 |
| Abstraction (continued) | offer professional insights, interpretations and solutions to problems and issues (C3) | identify, conceptualise and define new and abstract problems and issues (C3) develop original and creative responses to problems and issues (C3) |
| Depth | knowledge that covers most of the principal areas (C1) | knowledge that covers most <i>if not all</i> of the main areas (C1) |
| | detailed knowledge and understanding of one or more specialisms , <i>some</i> informed by or at the forefront (C1) | extensive, detailed and critical knowledge and understanding in one or more specialisms <i>most of which is at or informed by developments at the forefront</i> (C1) |
| | | critical awareness of current issues and one or more specialisms (C1) |
| Research | knowledge and understanding of ways the subject/discipline/sector is developed, including a range of established techniques of enquiry or research methodologies (C1) | <i>applying</i> a range of standard and specialised research and/or equivalent instruments and techniques of enquiry (C2) |
| | executing a <i>defined project of research, development or investigation</i> and in identifying and implementing relevant outcomes (C2) | planning and executing a significant project of research, investigation or development (C2) |
| Autonomy | make judgements where data/information is limited or comes from a range of sources (C3) | deal with complex issues and make informed judgements in situations <i>in the absence of complete or consistent data/information</i> (C3) |
| | exercise autonomy and initiative in professional/equivalent activities (C5) | exercise substantial autonomy and initiative in professional and equivalent activities (C5) |
| | exercise significant managerial responsibility for the work of others and for a range of resources (C5) | take responsibility for own work and/or significant responsibility for the work of others. (C5) take significant responsibility for a range of resources (C5) |

| Considering mastersness | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Facets of mastersness | SCQF level 10 | SCQF level 11 |
| Autonomy (continued) | practise in ways that <i>show awareness</i> of own and others' roles and responsibilities (C5) | practise in ways which <i>draw on critical reflection</i> on own and others' roles and responsibilities (C5) |
| | manage complex ethical and professional issues in accordance with current professional and/or ethical codes or practices; recognise the limit of these codes and <i>seek guidance</i> where appropriate (C5) | manage complex ethical and professional issues and make informed judgements <i>not addressed</i> by current professional and/or ethical codes or practices (C5) |
| Unpredictability | practise in a range of professional level contexts that include a degree of unpredictability and/or specialism (C2) | practise in a <i>wide and often unpredictable variety of professional level</i> contexts (C2) |
| | demonstrate some originality and creativity in dealing with professional issues (C3) | demonstrating originality and/or creativity , including in practices (C2) |
| Professionalism | using a wide range of the principal professional skills (...etc) (C2) | using a significant range of the principal professional skills (...etc) (C2) |
| | using a <i>few</i> skills (...etc) that are specialised , advanced and/or at the forefront of a subject/discipline/sector (C2) | using a <i>range</i> of specialised skills (...etc) that <i>are at the forefront of, or informed by forefront developments</i> (C2) |
| | demonstrate <i>some originality and creativity</i> in dealing with professional issues (C3) | develop original and creative responses to problems and issues (C3) |
| | work, <i>under guidance</i> , in a peer relationship with specialist practitioners (C5) | work in a peer relationship with specialist practitioners (C5) |
| | present or convey, formally and informally, information about specialised topics to informed audiences (C4) | communicate, using appropriate methods, to a range of audiences with different levels of knowledge/expertise (C4) |
| | communicate with peers, senior colleagues and specialists on a professional level (C4) | communicate with peers, more senior colleagues and specialists (C4) |
| Relative demand placed on students | Applies to all the above. | |

Annex C: Working Group membership

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|-------------------------|--|
| Veronica Bamber (Chair) | Queen Margaret University |
| Val Belton | University of Strathclyde |
| Paul Bennett | Higher Education Academy |
| Christopher Coales | University of Glasgow |
| David Coates | University of Dundee |
| Jane Denholm | Critical Thinking (Consultant) |
| Linda Drew | Glasgow School of Art |
| James Dunphy | Robert Gordon University |
| Kevan Gartland | Glasgow Caledonian University |
| Heather Gibson | QAA Scotland (Officer) |
| Cathy Lambert | Edinburgh Napier University |
| Stephanie Miller | sparqs |
| Helen O'Shea | NUS Scotland |
| Sue Rigby | University of Edinburgh |
| Ian Robertson | Student |
| Rebecca Stuart Maxwell | Strathclyde University Student Association |

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Events and engagement

QAA 9th Enhancement Themes Conference, **Scoping workshop - identifying postgraduate taught issues**, Edinburgh, 8 March 2012

QAA Learning from International Practice: The Postgraduate Taught Student Experience project, **Scoping workshop - defining the project focus**, Edinburgh, 31 May 2012

University of Strathclyde Student Congress, **Focus group with postgraduate taught students**, 24 October 2012

QAA Learning from International Practice: The Postgraduate Taught Student Experience project, **Workshop: 'What is mastersness? Will I know it when I see it?'**, Glasgow, 30 November 2012

British Council Sub-Saharan Africa Study Tour of Scottish universities for 24 National University/ Higher Education Commission representatives, Workshop: **'What is mastersness? Will I know it when I see it?'**, Queen Margaret University, 19 February 2013

Queen Margaret University, Two proof of concept **'What is mastersness? Will I know it when I see it?' workshops** (Business and Management, Health Sciences), February 2013

Going Global Conference, **Poster presentation: 'Master's Education for the 21st Century: Learning from International Practices'**, British Council, Dubai, March 2013

Participated in Guardian Round Table, **'What next for postgraduate students?'**, May 2013

Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education - Enhancement Themes Conference, **Workshop: 'Learning from International Practice'**, Glasgow, June 2013

Master Class: the changing face of PGT in a research-intensive environment - UK Council for Graduate Education Conference, **Keynote presentation: 'Master's - What does that mean? C'est quoi? Que significa? WDIM? Pehelwani geda?'**, Birmingham, July 2013

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ISBN 978 1 84979 928 7

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786