Innovative assessment at Masters Level

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The current context

- Tougher times than ever before in HE
- Financial instability: substantial cuts (including in year) and little or no protection for teaching income;
- Capricious staffing decisions as HEIs manage cuts;
- Long-term and even short-term planning nigh on impossible.
Issues that impact on the context

- Unmodelled student fees structure for 2012;
- Increasing importance of National Student Survey and various league tables on perceptions of quality and student recruitment;
- New roles for students in quality assurance and enhancement;
- Uncertainties about the genuineness of government WP imperatives.
- International student visa restrictions;
- Intense international competition.
Opportunities/wiggle room

- Grow our international student base (but everyone else wants to too, and the curb on overseas skilled migrant workers announced recently can impact on student as well as staff recruitment);
- Increase the nature and scope of CPD on offer to employers (but on their terms not ours and everyone else wants to too);
- Increase third stream income (but everyone else wants to too);
- Increase the number of postgraduate students (but everyone else wants to too).

So Masters level programmes are ever more important.
Masters level programmes according to QAA

The next slides are taken from Master’s Degree Characteristics see http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/masters/mastersdegreecharacteristics.pdf

All UK courses at Master’s level need to take account of this document which cover purposes, differentiation from UG programmes, guidance on academic credit and European Credit Transfer, teaching and learning, T&L strategies, methods, assessment, quality and qualifications.
Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- deal with **complex** issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- demonstrate **self-direction and originality** in tackling and solving problems, and act **autonomously** in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level;
- continue to **advance** their knowledge and understanding, and develop **new skills** to a high level; and will have:
- the qualities and **transferable skills** necessary for employment requiring: (i) the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility; (ii) decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations; and (iii) the independent learning ability required for continuing professional development.
Three broad types of Masters awards as identified by QAA

- ‘research’;
- ‘specialised/advanced study’
- ‘professional/practice’.

Other countries have other systems
Higher education providers may offer a Master's degree with the specific intention of:

- Enabling students to focus on a particular aspect of a broader subject area in which they have prior knowledge or experience through previous study or employment; and/or

- Enabling students to focus on a particular subject area or field of study in greater depth than they encountered during the course of previous study or experience. This may include enabling students to develop knowledge of a new discipline or field of study in combination with a relevant subject area in which they have prior knowledge or experience; and/or

- Enabling students to learn how to conduct research, often linked to a particular discipline or field of study.
M level qualifications

Masters degrees are awarded after completion of taught courses, programmes of research, or a mixture of both. Longer, research-based programmes often lead to the degree of MPhil. Most Masters courses last at least one year (if taken full-time), and are taken by persons with Honours degrees (or equivalent achievement).

Some Masters degrees in science and engineering are awarded after extended undergraduate programmes that last, typically, a year longer than Honours degree programmes. Also at this level are advanced short courses, often forming parts of Continuing Professional Development programmes, leading to Postgraduate Certificates and Postgraduate Diplomas.

(Note: the MAs granted by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are not academic qualifications.)
Taught programmes will often include a greater emphasis on:

- the delivery of structured learning as opposed to independent study [c.f.] those which are dedicated to the actual undertaking of research; and/or

- enabling students to undertake a research project on a topic within the area of interest that makes up the majority of the overall assessment; and/or

- enabling students to specialise or to become more highly specialised in an area of employment or practice related to a particular profession.
Academic credit at M level
(QAA guidance for England)

- A master's degree will have a typical minimum of 180 credits, of which at least 150 will be at master's level.
- For an integrated master's, a credit allocation of 480 with at least 120 at master's level is identified.
- No credit values are given for master's conducted primarily via research, but taught components of research master's degrees may attract credit.
- An MPhil delivered primarily via structured learning ('taught') will have a typical minimum credit value of 360, of which 240 will be at master's level.
European credit transfer system (ECTS)

- Master’s degrees typically have 90-120 ECTS credits (180-240 UK credits), with a minimum of 60 credits (120 UK credits) at the level of the second cycle.

- For the award of ECTS credits, the learning outcomes of a qualification must be consistent with the relevant outcomes identified in the qualification descriptor for the end-of-cycle award (the 'Dublin Descriptors') set out in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.
Methods might include all or any of the following, selected as appropriate to the discipline or field of study and the programme's aims, mode of delivery and typical entrants:

- lectures
- tutorials
- seminars
- practical work, for example in a laboratory, in the field, workshop or studio
- the use of textbooks, journal papers, electronic databases and other self-study and e-learning materials
- project work
- practice sessions and learning through case studies
- work-based learning. (Rather dull?)
Characteristic outcomes of Masters degrees

i  A systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice.

ii A comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.

iii Originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline.

iv Conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline; and
  - to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.
My questions: mapping the student experience at Master’s Level

- Will students feel from the outset that they are on a Master’s programme?
- Are you ensuring that students are immersed in the subject they have come to study from the outset?
- Is induction a valuable and productive introduction to the course (or just the distribution of bags and bags of paper)?
- Do students have a positive and balanced experience across the programme?
- Are there points in the academic year when there doesn’t seem to be much going on?
Teaching for learning at Masters level

- Is there a coherent model of progression across programme?
- Are there clearly way-marked sources of student support throughout the course?
- Are students using critical thinking and high levels of analytical thought?
- Are students working autonomously?
- Does independent research comprise part of the programme?
- Do students have opportunities of working together?
The context for reviewing M-level assessment

- Most HEIs are aiming to increase the number of post-graduate students they recruit;
- In many nations, undergraduate recruitment is at, or close to saturation;
- In a competitive global environment, Masters programmes need to have a competitive edge;
- Authentic assessment can be a Unique Selling Point for Masters Programmes.
What is M-Level assessment currently like?

- This is the subject of my UK NTFS project and I am aiming to find out more;
- To date I know that dissertations and exams feature heavily (excessively?) in Masters programmes;
- Scandinavian and N European nations make greater use of oral assessment in undergraduate and M level programmes than in the UK, New Zealand and Australia.

See Assimilate summaries [http://assimilate.teams.leedsmet.ac.uk/case-studies](http://assimilate.teams.leedsmet.ac.uk/case-studies)

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At Masters level, assessment matters even more!

- Many Masters programmes are professionally-orientated or vocational hence the need for a strong focus on authentic assessment;
- Students have high levels of expectation from their tutors at Masters level;
- We need to distinguish our programmes from those offered by our competitors worldwide.
Assessment *for* learning

1. Tasks should be **challenging**, demanding higher order learning and integration of knowledge learned in both the university and other contexts;

2. Learning and assessment should be **integrated**, assessment should not come at the end of learning but should be part of the learning process;

3. Students are involved in self assessment and reflection on their learning, they are involved in **judging performance**;

4. Assessment should encourage **metacognition**, promoting thinking about the learning process not just the learning outcomes;

5. Assessment should have a **formative** function, providing ‘feedforward’ for future learning which can be acted upon. There is opportunity and a safe context for students to expose problems with their study and get help; there should be an opportunity for dialogue about students’ work;
6. Assessment expectations should be made visible to students as far as possible;
7. Tasks should involve the active engagement of students developing the capacity to find things out for themselves and learn independently;
8. Tasks should be authentic; worthwhile, relevant and offering students some level of control over their work;
9. Tasks are fit for purpose and align with important learning outcomes;
10. Assessment should be used to evaluate teaching as well as student learning.

(Sue Bloxham, unpublished paper for HEA)
Boud *et al* 2010: ‘Assessment 2020’:

Assessment has most effect when...:

1. It is used to *engage* students in learning that is productive.
2. Feedback is used to actively *improve* student learning.
3. Students and teachers become *responsible partners* in learning and assessment.
4. Students are *inducted* into the assessment practices and cultures of higher education.
5. Assessment *for* learning is placed at the *centre* of subject and program design.
6. Assessment for learning is a focus for staff and institutional development.
7. Assessment provides inclusive and trustworthy representation of student achievement.
QAA Assessment expectations

Appropriate and effective assessment will enable students to demonstrate the outcomes of learning intended for the programme.

Assessment methods may be based on any or all of the following:

- essay assignments
- practical reports or portfolios
- a dissertation or other output from research/project work, which may include artefacts, performances or compositions
- written examinations
- oral examinations
- problem-solving exercises
- oral presentations
- posters
- placement reports.

(And others.....)
Authentic Master’s level assessment: my questions

- Are tasks aligned to the learning outcomes?
- Is assessments part of the learning programme, or is everything ‘sudden death’ end-point?
- Is there excessive bunching of the assessment workload that is highly stressful for students and unmanageable for staff?
- Are there plenty of opportunities for formative assessment, especially for students struggling to gauge the level of study?
- Are students over-assessed?
- Are your assignments uninspiring /tame/ excessively traditional?
Examples of innovative M level assessment from Assimilate

- Annie Banbury at Bedfordshire University teaches on an MSc in Marketing Communication with a strong focus on employability and a number of international students. Assignments include group tasks, but each student must also produce an individual development portfolio including industry standard diagnostic tests as used in the advertising industry, promotional podcasts and personal reflections: peer assessment is widely used.

- Andrew Johnstone at Cranfield University teaches on a number of Manufacturing Masters programmes. Part of the assessment diet includes a group assignment where students work in groups of 4-8, working with live clients on authentic tasks. Outputs include project reports, posters, presentations, and other features e.g. Lego models of new factory layouts, and employer clients are involved in the assessment.

- Marg Gilling at Massey (NZ) allows students to negotiate their own assignment formats, including fiction, painting and reflection.
More examples

- Daryl Alcock teaches on a Masters in Management at Central Queensland University (CQU), Rockhampton, Australia where assessment includes very short synthesis assignments, case studies and peer evaluated presentations.

- Anthony Rosie at Sheffield Hallam University leads an M Res module on the Philosophy of Research using task based on disaster recovery on high profile international events, where the focus is on research design and analysis. Outputs include reports and refection, and formative feedback is given to students incrementally.

- Philip Warwick at York University runs Masters programmes in Management for UK and international students which use a variety of assignments with plenty of formative assessment opportunities, which help students gauge the level of work required. Assessed presentations (including group ones), open book exams and reflective writing tasks from part of a diverse range of assignment types on these masters programmes, which also include traditional essays, exams and dissertations.
More examples

- Sarah Chesney teaches on Masters level programmes at the University of Cumbria in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. A digitally-enhanced patchwork text approach is used using Pebblepad to enable groups of four or five students to collectively throughout the module work on and peer review ‘patches’, which together with an individual reflection comprise the major assignment for the module, within an ePortfolio replacing cumbersome paper portfolios.

- Donna McAuliffe teaches on a variety of social sciences Masters programmes at Griffith University in Queensland Australia. One module on her Masters programme comprises an intensive week where students come together to work on interpersonal skills using videoed role plays of Counsellors and clients, under the supervision of trained tutors. They are also required to submit 500 word commentaries and personal reflections on the task.
Some from Australia

- Madelyn Patterson at Griffith University Queensland teaches on a Masters programme in Genetic Counselling. The course uses a range of authentic assessments including coursework, multiple choice tests and practical assignments. Students are assessed individually on their ability to unravel complex genetic problems building genetics family histories and working on authentic case studies. Role plays, skills tests, short written responses to ethics issues and reflective journals are also used.

- Jeff Sayer at James Cooke University, Queensland, Australia runs a Masters in Development Practice, principally for international students, preparing them to work in sustainable development contexts. Assignments are highly authentic and designed to be useful to the communities with whom they are working, for example, the presentation to the communities concerned of systems models, risk assessments and development plans, based on their own on-site research.
Some from Leeds

- Jo Drugan at Leeds University works on a Computer Assisted Translation module on a taught Masters degree and assignments are geared towards enabling students to demonstrate authentic skills. Students work in teams on real-life scenarios and engage in peer assessment, which is important in developing interpersonal skills.

- Chris Garbett at Leeds Metropolitan University leads an MSc in Building Surveying and runs modules on Property Asset management, including distance learning options. Assignments include scenarios which involve students in learning teams working on in simulations where they are property managers for accountants in various cities. They can gain pre-submission feedback via wikis on their outputs and personal reflection is also assessed.
Auckland, Worcester and Rockhampton

- Ken Simpson at UNITEC Institute Technology in New Zealand teaches on a Masters of Business that uses an incremental assessment approach. Some students have the opportunity to work on live assignments with local companies in which they immerse themselves in a consultancy experience, producing overview reports of real use to the companies concerned.

- Colin Price at Worcester University ran an MSc module in the History of Computing where the assessment comprised the production of four position papers throughout the module replacing final summative assessment.

- Lisa Bracknell at Central Queensland University (CQU), Rockhampton, Australia teaching on an Occupational health and Safety programme asks students to produce a safe activity design or a risk assessment in a live context. Obtaining ethics approval for the live task is often one of the more challenging elements of the project.
Three more from Rockie

- Teresa Moore at Central Queensland University (CQU), Rockhampton, Australia teaches on a Masters in Learning Management gets students involved in designing computer-based simulations and other kinds of authentic assessment.

- Ken Kwong teaches on Masters programmes at Central Queensland University (CQU), Rockhampton, Australia on Railway Signalling and Communications and Operational Management using portfolio assessment. Higher grades are given for original work that impacts on the local national or international railway context.

- Daryl Alcock teaches on a Masters in Management at Central Queensland University (CQU), Rockhampton, Australia where assessment includes very short synthesis assignments, case studies and peer evaluated presentations.
Giving feedback at Master’s level

- Masters programmes are often highly compressed in the UK so good timing of assignments and feedback is crucial.
- Peer feedback is especially appropriate at Master’s level, as competence in sensitive peer evaluation is a highly regarded postgraduate attribute.
- If dissertations are used, frequent incremental feedback at checkpoints will avoid high failure rates and the most severe plagiarism problems.
So what is the difference between assessing at UG and M level?

1. What is ‘mastery?’ Some staff are not quite sure. They talk about critical thinking but are not sure what it is.”
2. Our learning outcomes would be pretty much the same…it becomes more of a qualitative
3. [M level students should] be able to take something back to its first principles, synthesize it and then decide what to do
4. The level of critical analysis, the ability to utilise different resources to underpin the students’ arguments
5. Masters students are expected to identify problems and look for solutions in their practice.
6. Application and development of students own theoretical ideas
7. Overall, we’re expecting much more independent work and therefore we can set more challenging tasks, we can be less prescriptive in a way, about what they have to do.
8. Marking criteria is the difference.
And some more preliminary thoughts from Assimilate

- Things like selection from the canon, organisation from the canon, [things that] more-demanding and authentic assignments can test.
- Freedom: students should have choice. …also originality.
- Without us necessarily doing anything, just because we recruit at a higher level, you cut out various weaknesses You can expect they will do a wider range of reading. You can expect greater technical competence.
- Skills at undergraduate level are simpler and not as deep. At Masters level they have to grasp much more complex inter-personal skills,
- There are much more detailed and clearer competencies.
- Masters level students are also more experienced generally, and will self monitor more carefully and challenge others who may be behaving in disrespectful ways.
- I don’t see a huge leap, a big difference. I don’t really. It should be progressive
- I would see it rather of it as a continuum, using criteria which may be stricter, using criteria which emphasise more some skills
Conclusions

- The market for new Masters programmes will be very competitive, with high levels of global competition;
- Good Masters curriculum and assessment design is imperative to enhance recruitment and success rates;
- Quality of programmes really does matter!
- Authentic learning opportunities and assessment tasks are highly prized by students.
References & background reading

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