

# The return of the Master

by Christian Tauch

**The key term in higher education reform in Europe today is ‘Bologna process’. One of the essential elements of this reform, decided upon in 1999, is the introduction of study structures based on two tiers – an undergraduate and a graduate phase.**

By many critics this reform has been denounced as the ‘Americanisation’ of European higher education. This myopic view ignores that the *Bakkalaureus* (undergraduate) and the *Magister* (graduate) used to be, since the founding of the first universities in the medieval era, the dominant university degrees in most European countries up to the 19th century. The reintroduction of these degrees in European higher education is more accurately described as a return to its best traditions.

At the Prague meeting in 2001, the European ministers approved the proposal that a Bachelor degree in Europe should require a minimum of 180 ECTS credits and a maximum of 240 ECTS credits, or three to four years of full-time study.<sup>1</sup>

With the Berlin meeting only a few months away, attention is now turning, among other important objectives, toward Master degrees. Is there a common pattern for Master degrees emerging all over Europe? Which countries have already introduced Master degrees and which haven’t? What are the access

requirements for the new programmes? Will they be rather ‘academic’ or ‘professional’ in orientation?

To find answers to these questions, the European University Association (EUA) commissioned a study on Master degrees and joint degrees, which has been carried out with the support of the European Commission.<sup>2</sup> This article sums up the findings on Master degrees.

## Which country has which degrees?

European countries have either ‘short’ postgraduate Master degrees of one to two years (60–120 ECTS credits), building on an undergraduate degree of 3–4 years (180–240 credits), or they have the ‘long’ integrated Master degrees of five years duration (300 ECTS credits) or longer, which happens to be the dominant characteristic for many countries in continental Europe.

The **UK, Ireland and Malta** have always used the two-tier system, but the **Nordic and Baltic countries** are also well advanced in introducing it. **Denmark** has decided to introduce the two-tier structure in *all* disciplines, including medicine and dentistry. The picture becomes more heterogeneous when one turns to Western and Southern Europe. **Italy and France** have decided to introduce basically a 3+2 structure. In **Spain and Portugal** the operational reform steps still have to be defined. **Greece** has postgraduate degrees, but they build on rather long undergraduate degrees. In **The Netherlands** the universities have also begun to convert their one-tier programmes into the two-tier design. The **Flemish part of Belgium** has adopted a new law introducing Ba/Ma programmes. Discussions in the **francophone part of Belgium** are pointing into the same direction. In **Germany**, the two-tier structure was introduced in 1998 on an experimental basis, parallel to the existing long one-tier programmes. The new **Austrian** higher education law of 2002 stipulates that all new study programmes – with few exceptions – have to be organised in the Ba/Ma structure. A national directive is under preparation in **Switzerland** that introduces a new, Bologna-compatible degree structure. **Hungary** recently has decided to intro-

duce consecutive two-tier degrees in the universities that did not exist until now. In **Bulgaria**, the two-tier system was introduced in 1995. In **Poland** many higher education institutions have moved to two-tier programmes. Equally, in the **Czech Republic**, the majority of higher education institutions have begun to introduce a short Master programme. **Slovakia** is making long integrated programmes the exception to the rule. In **Slovenia and Romania** Master degrees of 120 ECTS credits are offered but they build on undergraduate degrees that require four or more years of study.

## Do Master programmes have different profiles?

The European situation is quite heterogeneous regarding the perceived need to differentiate between different profiles of Master degrees. In some countries, the differentiation between more ‘academic’ and more ‘professional’ Master degrees seems irrelevant, whereas others distinguish quite clearly between the two. Should there be clearly professionally oriented programmes, preparing graduates for specific sectors of the labour market but maybe not allowing immediate access to doctoral studies? Should there be, on the other hand, Master programmes with a strong element of independent research that would qualify the graduate for a career in science and research?

In some countries these questions play no role at all, yet in others they are at the very heart of the reform. Thus **Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Malta, Poland and Slovakia** indicated that they do not distinguish in principle between different profiles. In **The Netherlands**, both the universities and the *hogescholen* will offer ‘academic’ and ‘higher professional’ Master degrees, depending on the profile of the programme. In **Germany**, programmes with a more academic orientation lead to a Master of Arts or Sciences, while a more application-oriented programme leads to a Master of Engineering. In **Switzerland** there is no systematic differentiation between ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ degrees. On the other hand, in **France**, the clear distinction between the two types of Master programmes is at the

heart of the reform: from the start, the student will have to choose between a professional profile and a research profile. **Latvia** differentiates between academic and professional Masters (and Bachelors), both in names and standards. **Sweden** has just introduced a new type of professional Master degree that is to play an important role in life-long learning.

## The ‘old’ versus ‘new’ Masters

In most European countries both one-tier and two-tier structures still exist in parallel, with a tendency toward replacing the first by the latter in all disciplines except medicine and related fields. This raises the question of whether the academic value of all Master degrees within one national system is considered to be the same (in terms of giving access to doctoral studies, *etc*) The answer, without any exception, is yes. Therefore, in many countries, little attempt is made to differentiate between the two in terms of nomenclature, and the Diploma Supplement (DS)<sup>3</sup> is used to explain the exact nature of the programme.

## Access requirements for new Master programmes

As more and more European countries are introducing two-tier structures, there is more emphasis on the requirements for passing from one level to the other. Not surprisingly, the basic access requirement for a Master programme in all countries is a first degree at Bachelor level, normally in combination with more specific requirements defined by the department offering the Master programme. However, an increasing number of countries are allowing access to holders of equivalent, often less formal, qualifications and provide more bridges between

the professional higher education sector and the universities. Thus in **Norway and Estonia**, a Bachelor or a professional qualification give access to a Master programme. In **Sweden**, a Bachelor is still required for admission to a Master programme but this might change as a result of the recently introduced professional Master degree; new methods for validating professional experience, using credit systems, are being developed. There is a Europe-wide trend of linking more closely the sectors of higher education and professional education, of formal qualifications and experiential learning and of taking acquired skills and competencies into account.

## The importance of credit systems in the Bologna reforms

Many European countries have no tradition of credit systems, neither for transfer nor for accumulation purposes. The Bologna Declaration could resolve that, as it proposes the introduction of a credit system as one of the central tools to facilitate recognition and mobility. ECTS has been accepted in all participating countries of the Bologna process, although the degree of implementation varies considerably. Even in those countries where there is no legal obligation at all to use credits, such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland or Slovenia, ECTS is now commonly used for mobility purposes and may be applied to accumulation some day.

## The Diploma Supplement

In all countries where long and short Master programmes exist in parallel, their academic value is considered to be the same. The Diploma Supplement (DS) is

therefore essential to explain the exact nature of the programme. Some countries have made – or are making – its introduction a legal obligation. In others, it is delivered on a regular basis, although there is no explicit obligation.

## Definitions and degree architecture

There is still a significant variety in the duration and architecture of degrees in the European Higher Education Area, but there is a dominant trend toward Master-level degrees that require the equivalent of five years of full-time study or 300 ECTS credits – although examples of slightly longer and slightly shorter courses exist. While medicine and related disciplines require a different scheme in most countries, this is not in contradiction to the quite homogeneous pattern that prevails in all other disciplines. More guidance as to the number of credits required for the completion of what is internationally regarded as a degree at Master level is needed. Courses that are too short are likely to face recognition problems within Europe and even more so outside Europe. The good news is that the majority of countries and institutions seem inclined to offer 90–120 Master programmes. A conference organised by the Finnish Ministry of Education on 14–15 March 2003 is focusing on exactly these questions and will hopefully come up with concrete proposals regarding the architecture of Master degrees in the European Higher Education Area.

*1 ECTS: European Credit Transfer System, with 60 credits equalling one year of full-time study. ECTS has been or is being introduced in all countries participating in the Bologna process. More information can be found at [europa.eu.int/comm/education/socrates/guide-en.doc](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/socrates/guide-en.doc).*

*2 Tauch, C. and Rauhvargers, A. (2002) ‘Survey on Master Degrees and Joint Degrees in Europe’, see [www.unige.ch/eua](http://www.unige.ch/eua). The findings on joint degrees were presented by Andrejs Rauhvargers in the Winter 2002 issue of EAIE Forum (vol. 4, no. 3).*

*3 The Diploma Supplement (DS) is a document attached to a higher education diploma aiming at improving international ‘transparency’ and at facilitating the academic and professional recognition of qualifications. See [europa.eu.int/comm/education/recognition/diploma.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/recognition/diploma.html).*

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