

# **Securing and maintaining academic standards: benchmarking M level programmes**

17 February 2006

Universities UK, Woburn House, London

This summary is intended to provide an overview of opinions surrounding the possibility of developing benchmarks for academic programmes at M level. The views expressed in the notes that follow reflect the discussions held in each of the five groups. Although a consensus of opinion across **all** groups on **all** issues was not reached, it was felt at the meeting that there was a sufficient convergence of opinion on matters of principle relating to M level benchmarking to enable QAA to take forward its discussions, with a view to developing policy on this issue (see 'next steps'). Where there was a difference of opinion across groups, this is indicated in the notes. In such cases it will be for QAA, in consultation with the UK Steering Group for Benchmarking, and the higher education sector and stakeholders, to decide how to find a balance between two or more positions. Further details concerning outcomes from the event and intended next steps are available on request from Dr Laura Bellingham (l.bellingham@qaa.ac.uk).

## **Key themes**

### **Possible approaches towards benchmarking at M level**

#### **An M level statement as an extension of the existing qualification descriptor**

The general feeling across all groups was that a generic statement at M level, viewed as an extension or elaboration of the existing M level qualification descriptor, would be useful to those involved in programme design, approval and delivery. An agreement was not reached at the meeting on an appropriate term for the statement but it was felt that reference to a 'benchmark statement' should be avoided since the statement would not cover subject-level outcomes, similarly, participants were not in favour of using the term 'qualification benchmark' as the statement might extend to more than one different type of M level award (see below).

#### **Taking account of the multiplicity of M level awards**

Opinion on how best to treat the existence of different types of M level award was mixed; some groups felt that a series of generic statements should be developed, each specific to a particular type of award, whereas others felt that the most appropriate model would be a single statement to cover master's awards that identified postgraduate certificates and diplomas as exit points. This divergence of opinion reflected the outcome of a discussion held in several groups about the nature of 'm-ness' (see below) and the characteristics of different types of M level awards, and whether different types of award are sufficiently similar in nature (**in addition to the level of the learning outcomes**) to enable the development of a single, credible statement. With regard to the distinction between taught awards and awards wholly or significantly by research (the MPhil), some groups felt strongly that it would be inappropriate to attempt to benchmark the MPhil whereas others felt that an attempt should be made to include it, albeit alongside a recognition of its differing characteristics.

#### **M level benchmark statements for individual disciplines**

In addition to the development of a generic M level statement(s), it was suggested that QAA might enable subject communities to develop their own M level statement where there was a perceived need. Such statements would be more akin to the

existing subject benchmark statements for H level bachelor's degrees. This suggestion emerged from a recognition that certain subject communities, particularly, although not exclusively, those with a strong professional or vocational element, regard the development of a benchmark statement at M level as being of central importance whereas others do not perceive such a need. There was not, however, universal agreement on whether QAA should retain a degree of flexibility in allowing M level statements to be developed in some disciplines and not in others.

### **Why benchmark at M level: the UK and Europe**

The potential value of an M level statement(s) as a reference point for course designers, deliverers and reviewers was raised within several groups. Capturing the essence of what constitutes an award at M level (over and above the existing qualification descriptor) was considered to be of considerable importance to ensuring the continued maintenance of academic standards at this level across institutions; to this end, a statement representing an elaboration of the existing M level qualification descriptor would be welcome.

Of particular concern to participants was the current and future status of UK master's awards in a European context. It was suggested that the development of an M level statement(s) might serve to support the UK model in offering an assurance to others about the parity of academic standards at this level, based on the achievement of learning outcomes rather than the length of an award.

A significant amount of time was spent in some groups discussing the current and future status of integrated master's awards in light of the Bologna agreement. Again, it was felt that benchmarking such awards might serve to protect or to enhance their status within this broader context.

### **Challenges associated with M level benchmarking**

The speed with which postgraduate education in the UK is able to respond to developments in a discipline and to market forces in comparison with undergraduate education, was noted as a strength that should not be compromised by any move towards benchmarking at this level. Put another way, the development of an M level statement(s) should be seen as enabling, rather than constraining, innovation by those at the forefront of programme design and delivery.

A particular challenge to the development of benchmark statements specific to certain disciplines is that much of UK taught postgraduate provision is multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary in nature, with many programmes sitting at the interface between one or more subject areas commonly recognised at undergraduate level. For this reason, it was considered that should subject benchmark statements be developed at M level they might, most usefully, be developed for closely allied groups of subjects or sectors. Notwithstanding this suggestion, it was felt that achieving a balance between a statement that is sufficiently broad so as to encompass the diverse range of programmes in existence, while still being of practical value to practitioners, represents a considerable challenge for subject communities.

Some of the complexities experienced by subject communities when developing and working with subject benchmark statements at H level were expected to arise at M level: for instance, ensuring a sufficiently clear use of language that would be accessible to a range of stakeholders; deciding how best to articulate standards in terms of performance level; and how best to define the relationship between academic standards (regarded by some as 'fitness for award') and professional competence (referred to by some as 'fitness to practice') in certain disciplines.

Lastly, participants felt that defining the essence of 'postgraduate-ness' or 'm-ness' would be of critical importance to the credibility and utility of a statement(s) at M level. It was suggested that QAA might devote further attention to this issue.

### **Structure and form of an M level statement**

Although the majority of discussion focused on the broader issues associated with M level benchmarking, some groups put forward more detailed suggestions as to the structure that an M level statement might take. In addition to a section defining 'postgraduate/m-ness', one group suggested that the following sections might be included: knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities, learning methods and outcomes. If different types of M level qualification were to be included in a single statement, the recommendation put forward was that a section relating specifically to each type of award should follow on from these core sections.

### **Next steps**

- QAA is now in a position to be able to take forward its discussions surrounding the possibility of M level benchmarking, in consultation with the higher education community and stakeholders.
- The next step will involve a series of focus groups with representatives from different constituents of the higher education sector and stakeholders to explore particular issues in greater detail. A list of key issues for further exploration will emerge from an in-depth consideration of the proceedings of the event of 17 February 2006, in consultation with the UK Steering Group for Benchmarking, under the current chairmanship of Professor David Eastwood. This is likely to revolve around three key strands, all of which will be considered within the context of both UK higher education and current and future developments within a European context:
  - a definition of 'm-ness' and the nature of M level qualifications
  - the structure and content of a generic statement at M level and its relationship to the existing qualification descriptor
  - the feasibility and utility of developing M level benchmark statements in particular discipline areas.