

MEMORANDUM
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FROM	Jonathan Gee (Academic Vice President)
TO	Associate Professor Allison Kirkman Vice Provost (Academic and Equity)
COPY TO	Jenny Christie Senior Academic Quality Adviser
DATE	Friday 9 October
SUBJECT	Student Feedback on Proposed Framework for 180-point Master's degrees

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed framework for 180-point master's degrees. This memo has been drafted after consultation with a range of students, including the VUWSA Executive, students studying 180-point and 240-point Masters, PhD and Honours, as well as undergraduate students contemplating postgraduate study at Victoria. This memo makes comment on the sections prescribed in the second part of the consultation memo and includes recommendations regarding the proposed framework.

Scheduling and timeframe issues

VUWSA believes that some 180-point programmes should not be specifically targeted at international students. Many international students attend Victoria not only for its reputation, but also to take part in the New Zealand student experience. Having 180-point Master's programmes that consist of both domestic and international students will allow international students to better connect with domestic students to enhance their New Zealand experience. Start dates should therefore not only align with the northern hemisphere academic year, but also with domestic undergraduate students who wish to begin in Trimesters 3 or 1. We also note the reduced level of orientation and support for international students beginning in Trimester 2.

Due to the lack of a student allowance at Master's level, we recommend that 180-point Master's should include the ability to complete the degree part-time, to better accommodate students who are engaged in fulltime work.

Generic degrees vs. 'named' degrees

VUWSA does not have an established view on whether generic degrees should be encouraged. However, we note any changes or additions of individual subjects to such generic degrees should require approval through to Academic Board and Committee.

We agree that any proposal for a named degree should require a strong justification. Where a named degree is appropriate, we recommend that there should be a strong connection with industry in the framework of such degrees. This may include: accreditation with the relevant professional body, a practicum component in the relevant industry, or strong testimonials from the industry in support for that named degree and its course content.

Impact on other Master's programmes and on Honours

The impact of 180-point Master's degrees on other postgraduate qualifications, such as a postgraduate certificate/diploma, Honours and 240-point Master's has gathered much discussion among students. VUWSA supports renaming 240-point Master's degrees to include "Research". However, the purpose of this change should not be because 240-point Master's degrees are viewed as "higher quality" than 180-point Master's. In spite of the different number of points, both 180 and 240-point Master's should be of the same high quality that a Master's level qualification requires. The name change should therefore be made in order for students to better understand the different pathways and skills that different postgraduate qualifications offer – that is, a professional pathway that leads to advanced practical skills recognised by the relevant industry, or an academic pathway that leads to advanced research skills. We therefore recommend that these pathways should be better articulated to undergraduate students contemplating postgraduate study.

VUWSA also strongly supports the ability for students who are partway through their Honours qualification to switch to a 180-point Master's (given the overlap of 400-level papers for Honour's and Master's programmes for some qualifications).

Content and structure

Practicum and project work in 180-point Master's should be strongly encouraged. However, students must be equipped with well-trained mentors/supervisors and be able to be assessed at an advanced level for such practicums and/or projects.

Preparing graduates for employment

VUWSA agrees that 180-point Master's have the potential to provide advanced level knowledge and skills to better prepare graduates for employment in relevant industries. We therefore reiterate our strong desire for such programmes to require professional accreditation. If no professional accreditation is possible, then a strong justification of why this is the case should be articulated in proposals.

Since advanced professional/practical skills and knowledge are often strong considerations for students to choose to study a 180-point Master's, we recommend that a review or research is conducted into what jobs 180-point Masters graduates end up in, so that such programmes are consistently industry-ready and fill the needs of the job market. This may also include a survey of employers of such graduate; obtaining qualitative data on the value they place on job seekers who graduate with a 180-point Master's.

Progression to PhD

We reiterate that postgraduate pathways should be clearly articulated, so that students are studying the appropriate postgraduate degree for either future PhD study or career progression.

Conversion Master's degrees

Since conversion Master's are catered for student who wish to re-train mid-career, accreditation with the relevant professional body is encouraged. Further to this, practicum or project work is important in order to distinguish the degree from undergraduate degrees. We reiterate the need for clear assessment in such practicum and project work, as well as the need for highly trained mentors/supervisors where appropriate.

Resources, support and viability

The fact that the student allowance is no longer available for postgraduate study except Honours means that many students are opting to complete an Honours degree rather than a Master's degree. We therefore express our support for the retention of Honours degrees, even where a discipline has introduced a 180-point Master's in that area. In the same vein, since students are facing greater financial constraints on undertaking Master's study, more postgraduate scholarships should be offered for non-thesis based qualifications.

It must be noted that if the creation of more 180-point Master's programmes will result a significant increase in international student numbers, a number of these students will likely face financial hardship.

Conclusion

Overall, VUWSA believes that a framework for 180-point Master's should focus on providing students with a high quality postgraduate qualification that has strong connections with the relevant industry. With these recommendations, we believe that proposals for future 180-point Master's will better cater to student needs. Ongoing reviews of 180-point Master's should also be undertaken to measure whether these programmes are fit for purpose, and are giving graduates a competitive edge in obtaining jobs in their relevant industry.