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Enhancing Experience and Support Provided to Students within Bologna Professionally-Focused Master's Degree

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to analyse Master's students' views on the competences of (i) the ideal profile of a Master's supervisor, and (ii) the ideal profile of their own, as Master's students. Accordingly, a descriptive and reflective perspective regarding the results is adopted. Additionally, the authors have the objective of presenting a set of recommendations that can help students to deal with the different dimensions and contexts of their student/professional experience: theoretical and pedagogical content, teacher training pre-service tasks, and practice-based research projects. The recommendations go in line with the promotion of support programmes that should not follow a one-size fits all approach, but should instead consider the diversity among students' profiles as a flagship towards institutional quality enhancement.

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1. Introduction

This paper brings valuable insights about the Master's degree quality profiles of students and supervisors from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, integrates its reading at a national level and finally draws some considerations about the topic and its implications based on the intersection between the data collected and its reference theoretical background. Although data were gathered within a specific Higher Education (HE) institution and it will be essential to present the national background on the 'renewed' Master's degree, we strongly consider that this paper will address other international contexts' concerns, due to the supra-institutional and supra-national character of this theme.

One of the major aims of the Bologna process was to make Europe's HE systems more transparent and competitive. Therefore, the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)

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(Bologna Working Group, 2005) provided a mechanism for aligning the qualifications frameworks of different countries to each other, trying to accomplish a comparative goal. It is intended that these Bologna graduates must be equipped to enter a variety of types of employment and, in particular, possess the skills and experience necessary for the specific profession or area of practice.

Therefore, considering the focus of this paper, a Master's graduate is expected to have: subject-specific attributes, an in-depth knowledge and understanding of their profession, informed by current practice, scholarship and research, a critical awareness of current issues and developments regarding the subject and the profession, the ability to apply research to professional situations, both at practical and theoretical levels, the ability to use a range of techniques and research methods applicable to their professional activities, and other generic attributes (including skills relevant to an employment-setting) (QAA, 2010).

Within this context, Warring (2011) defined the concept of “Mastersness” emphasising the relevance of seven facets about what constitutes Master’s level study: Abstraction, Depth (of Learning), Research and Inquiry, Complexity, Autonomy, Unpredictability and Professionalism. These facets have been used, refined and defined in the context of the project: *Learning from International Practice: Postgraduate Taught Student Experience* (Working Group chaired by Veronica Bamber with the strategic management from the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee - a committee with a membership of all Vice-Principals in Teaching and Learning from all Scottish HE institutions or their equivalents). The project addressed the answers to the question: “What does it mean to be a Master’s- level student and how are they supported in making that transition?” Moreover, the model learnt itself to be developed into a tool to be used by practitioners in workshop sessions. Results have indicated that the work on supporting students into Master’s-level study is deeply associated with the support provided to practitioners and the complexity of the provision (QAA, 2014).

On the other hand, until this moment, we find a gap in the literature regarding the quality profile that the Master’s supervisor should have, so s/he can help the student to achieve the “Mastersness”. Therefore, much more effort should be put in questioning and analysing the professional implications and outcomes of the supervisory role within the particular context of Teacher Training.

In fact, in the context of Teacher Training, the focus of this paper, given the professional nature of this area, some aspects of the reforms carried out (and that will be explored in the next section) offer different opportunities and challenges for students, supervisors and employers to create a multifaceted landscape which requires a shared understanding of the nature of the programmes and the profiles of the graduates (Bünning & Shilela, 2006).

2. Portuguese background on Master’s degree

The Bologna Process has motivated major changes in the Portuguese legal framework concerning the role of the Master’s degree in the context of the Teacher Training courses (Portuguese Republic Law 43/2007). At present, according to the new *Legal Framework for Qualifications for Teaching* (Portuguese Republic Law 1189/2010), the Master’s degree has the core objective of conferring professional qualifications legally required to teach at all levels: from Pre-School to Secondary Education. This recent legal background has moved the emphasis from a purely research-focused Master’s approach attended by previously legally awarded professionals (until the academic 2007/2008) to a professionally-focused approach to achieve the teaching qualification.

This new design of the Master’s degree stresses that training at this postgraduate level aims to promote the construction of the teacher's professional identity, by including the development of research skills and an in-depth reflection on professional contexts combined with a critical understanding of different dimensions of the educational career. It promotes a strategic interaction between the teaching and research processes, with reference to the development of a set of knowledge about the action in pedagogical settings intertwined with references from the scope of the areas of educational sciences and teaching.

In practice, this means that, within the 2nd cycle of Bologna (that corresponds to the Master’s degree), students will have 3 semesters with curricular units associated with Didactics (teacher and learning pedagogy in specific content areas: Portuguese language, Maths, Science/Geography/History and Arts/Design, ICT), curricular development and organisation or epistemology of education. In the second and third semesters, the students have a curricular unit that integrates and supervises a pre-service experience (teacher training internship) in a kindergarten (2nd semester) and primary school education (3rd semester). Simultaneously, Master’s students have a specific

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