

EDITORIAL

Helen King

As Heather Sears describes in her 'Busy Academics Guide' (pages 4-5), a lot of attention has been paid in recent years to supporting research postgraduates. However, relatively little has been done to develop learning and teaching at taught postgraduate level despite the fact that, in the UK, "in 2002-03, almost 120,000 postgraduates embarked on taught Masters programmes compared to 16,000 starting PhDs" (HEPI, 2004).

In 2003-04 the GEES Subject Centre funded a programme of small-scale projects focused on learning and teaching at the taught postgraduate level. Our rationale for this theme was based on the following issues:

- The numbers of students undertaking postgraduate-level training is increasing.
- Additional specialisms may become increasingly favoured by discipline-specific employers as graduate numbers increase.
- There is currently little guidance on course design or specification for postgraduate level teaching compared with the undergraduate level.
- There are currently very few specific resources to support learning and teaching at this level.
- Some issues may be concentrated due to the short-term nature of postgraduate courses.

This edition of Planet captures the findings from these projects and other work in the area, and provides a platform on which the GEES Subject Centre can build further resources, services and activities.

Following on from Heather's general policy overview, the drivers and issues for the development of taught Masters programmes in the GEES disciplines are outlined by Lindsey McEwen and Dave Eastwood in their introductory articles. The following feature articles then provide a wide variety of examples and perspectives on learning and teaching at taught Masters level. The first two articles provide a general introduction to some of the key issues. Lindsey McEwen *et al* note how little guidance there is on course development, and suggests there may be questions on 'what is M level?'. Their research with over 80 students suggests that, in their personal experience, the Masters course is of a higher level than their undergraduate studies because it is more challenging, has an increased depth of engagement, utilises more co-learning with peers and staff, and has a more applied nature of study. The authors note that "the students see a definite progression" but what this progression actually is appears to be hard to capture tangibly within level descriptors or learning outcomes.

In contrast to the above students' views from a group of HEIs, Pauline Kneale outlines the perspectives from new members of staff in a single institution. They feel that teaching at Masters level should be about the lecturer doing all the talking as it is about their area of expertise. It is interesting that despite the movement towards innovation and experiential/active learning at undergraduate level, the 'chalk and talk' perception still persists, for some staff, at Masters level. This is a key professional development issue throughout higher education (HE) and, I

suggest, may relate to self-confidence and personal preference in terms of teaching style. For many staff, running highly interactive sessions where the students are 'given permission' to challenge the lecturer can be a long way outside the comfort zone. Pauline recommends that given the nature of Masters courses and the link to graduate employability, they should be more about 'learning how to learn and to keep up to date' than about specific content. This is particularly pertinent given the rapid turnover of knowledge, technical skills and the likelihood that the graduates will go into jobs at a tangent to the course content. Pauline, as with other authors in this edition, makes the link between course design and work-related activities – Masters courses are very much tending towards professional/vocational courses rather than purely academic endeavours; and the best way to set the students up for the world of work is to simulate the chaotic, problem-solving, team-based environment they are likely to enter. Finally, another key issue that Pauline raises with respect to staff development, is that of student diversity particularly with respect to international students who may have undertaken their undergraduate studies in a different HE system or through different teaching styles.

Emma Treby and Anita Shah pick up some of the above general themes in their description of the development of a Masters course which provides an excellent example of work-related learning and the issues therein.

Norman Moles *et al* also emphasise this 'real world' element in the design of a module and describe a publicly available resource that they suggest can "help to 'bridge the gap between scholarly activity and the work place.'"

Many Masters courses are intended to be taken up by a very broad range of students: in contrast the UHI Millennium Institute course, outlined by Price *et al*, clearly addresses a specific need in the region and provides an award directly relevant to the particular community the University serves. Interestingly, they also describe the use of technology not just for the delivery of tuition but also as a medium for administrative communication between geographically disparate University staff.

This e-learning theme is discussed further by Glynn Skerratt and Clodagh Murphy as a key issue for Masters programmes both as a means to supplement 'face-to-face' learning and a sole learning environment for distant or part-time learners. Their general discussion highlights considerations of student-tutor interaction, factors influencing student retention and institutional issues (particularly when working with overseas partner institutions). Paul Elsner illustrates this theme with a specific example of distance learning on a GIS course. He introduces the various communication methods available and raises the technical advantages and constraints. Robert Abraham *et al* build on the idea of e-learning in taught Masters courses and suggest its use for other postgraduate level qualifications such as MPhils and PhDs.

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In the articles by William Slattery and Randy Alexson, another dimension of Masters courses is explored: many Masters students have not come directly from undergraduate studies, or are even full-time students, but are undertaking the course as formal professional development related to their place of work. Both of these articles illustrate this with respect to in-service training for school teachers in America. William's article describes a full Masters course, and Randy's discusses the use of Masters level modules as a means to expose teachers to formal learning experiences at a graduate level from more remote or less densely populated areas who may not have the finance or time to undertake a full course.

Finally, an interesting article on taught postgraduate level in Jamaica illustrates the similarities and differences in issues, course content and distance-learning emphasis compared with the UK. This example, together with those from the USA, illustrates the international possibilities for sharing good practice in learning and teaching at all levels. Due to the global nature of the content of our disciplines, this is something that the GEES Subject Centre

has been involved in for some time – although HE systems may vary from country to country, course content and learning & teaching issues are often very similar. We very much welcome these international perspectives and would encourage other overseas colleagues to contribute also.

For me, this edition of *Planet* clearly illustrates the need for the GEES Subject Centre to take forward its work with respect to supporting taught postgraduate provision. A lot of good practice clearly exists but needs to be captured and shared, particularly with newer members of staff and with those who are setting up MSc courses for the first time. I would like to thank all the contributors for sharing their practices and perspectives.

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