FROM HONOURS TO COURSEWORK MASTERS

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Articulation in the new course structures

1. From its inception, NC2012 was conceived as a system that would allow for ready articulation to higher level courses, as well as ‘downward’ articulation by way of exit provisions for students not completing Master’s degrees in which they enrol.

2. Figure 1, taken from the Review of Course Structures report (2008), suggests the articulation possibilities.

3. Figure 1 suggests the intent to standardise course progression with a Bachelors’ degree representing three years of full-time work, those undertaking a fourth year doing so either through Honours or a Graduate Diploma, a Master’s degree representing the culmination of five years of study, and research doctorates expected to require eight years of study inclusive of prior studies.

4. The Figure also indicates the expected articulation pathways. Two major pathways are apparent, the ‘research pathway’ and the ‘coursework pathway’. The former involves articulating from an undergraduate degree to the PhD, either by way of an

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1 This paper is concerned with Master’s by coursework and Master’s by coursework and dissertation. Articulation from Honours courses to research Master’s degrees will be addressed in a separate paper.
Honours year or by way of a research Master’s degree. It was expected that there would be some articulation from Master’s by coursework degrees into professional doctorates.

5. The ‘coursework pathway’ provides for direct articulation from an undergraduate degree to a Master’s degree, sometimes by way of a Graduate Diploma. In some cases those without an undergraduate degree can articulate into the Graduate Diploma (and possibly beyond) by way of a Graduate Certificate.

6. Figure 1 also shows that students may enrol in a Master’s by coursework on completion of an Honours degree.

7. A number of rules have been adopted to facilitate articulation from Honours courses, including:

   - ‘That Master’s degrees of this university require the equivalent of at least two years of full-time study post the three year Bachelor’s degree or the equivalent of one year of full-time study post the Bachelor Honours of four years (or longer) degree.’ (AC R6/08)
   
   - ‘That postgraduate students should not normally be required to enrol in undergraduate units other than at Level 4.’ (AC R6/08)
   
   - ‘That credit should not be provided on a unit-for-unit basis in postgraduate courses for studies undertaken in the previously completed undergraduate courses (other than at fourth year level.’ (AC R6/08)
   
   - ‘That Master’s degrees normally require 16 units to be completed after the three-year Bachelor degree, or 8 units after either the Graduate Diploma or the four-year Bachelor degree with Honours.’ (AB R146/08)
   
   - ‘That postgraduate courses comprise units at Level 4 or above, but may include introductory content provided that it is taught and assessed at graduate level.’ (AB R 146/08)

8. It will be seen from the above that there has been an intention to consider the fourth year of an Honours degree as on a par with Graduate Diploma studies for articulation purposes. Despite this, there has been little canvassing of the issues concerning articulation from the Honours degrees (which focus on research preparation) into coursework Master’s degrees. This paper helps to fill the void.

9. Honours articulation with coursework master’s degrees raises a number of considerations. These include the role of Honours courses into the future, and several practical issues such as managing admission and credit. The rest of this paper discusses these matters.
The future of Honours

10. The first consideration is the role of Honours courses in the future. Though NC2012 is firmly committed to providing for the four-year integrated Bachelor of Philosophy (Hons) as well as an end-on Honours year for each of the three-year degrees, a number of universities, including Go8 universities, are reconsidering the future role of Honours courses. These institutions are exploring alternative pathways into the PhD, which may lead to an expectation in the future that the pathway should include a Master’s degree. The PhD itself is likely in the future to include formal coursework.

11. While there has been a general diminution of Honours enrolments, there remains strong demand for it in several disciplines at UWA, particularly within the arts and sciences. Whatever the long-term fate of Honours courses, for the foreseeable future it is desirable to continue to support their place within a structure that facilitates articulation.

12. Figure 2 provides Honours enrolment data for UWA for the period 1990 to 2011. In summary:
   (a) There was a steady increase in enrolments to 1999.
   (b) In 1999 enrolments peaked at 745.
   (c) Since then there has been a decline, with enrolments of 424 in 2011.

[Figure 2: Honours Students UWA 1990 - 2011]

Fig. 2 (Source: UNISTATS)

Managing articulation: eligibility, credit, and other practical issues

13. A second consideration concerns the aims and content of coursework Master’s degrees and the extent to which particular Honours courses articulate with these aims and content. Key questions in this regard include:
   (a) Does the Honours course contribute to development in the discipline of the Master’s degree?
(b) Does the Honours course provide an appropriate foundation for units in the Master’s degree?

Other than in the case of conversion courses, articulation should only be considered where both questions elicit a positive response.

14. The questions touch on two of the important considerations in articulation, namely: admission eligibility and credit considerations.

15. Credit should only be given in cases where the answers to the questions in 13 are positive. Thus, a student who has undertaken all his/her units from the Arts faculty (other than broadening units) and then completed the Honours year in political science would not be eligible for admission into the Master of Science degree (and therefore would not be granted credit). The same student may be eligible for admission into a ‘conversion’ degree (for example the Master of Commerce) but would not be granted credit for the completed fourth-year units. If the student sought to enrol into a Master’s degree in political science, the student would not only meet the eligibility criteria but would most likely be granted credit for up to 50% of the course.

16. A further consideration is the requirement for admission rules to courses to be clear and transparent:

- ‘That the admission requirements for all courses be transparent and easily understood by applicants and administrator’. (AC R6/08)
- ‘That faculties maintain a register indicating how any imprecisely defined admission criteria are operationalised’. (AC R127.09)

16. In the area of articulation, several rules are called for:

- Where a lower award articulates with a higher one, this should be specified in the admission rules of both courses, e.g. ‘This course articulates with the Master of ……’
- Including ‘successful completion of Graduate Diploma in X’ as one of entry criteria into relevant the Master of X degree (if necessary, specifying the required grade average for articulation).
- Providing exit provisions in Master’s degrees leading to award of Graduate Certificate/Diploma.

17. Where lower and higher courses prescribe similar admission requirements, consideration ought to be given to enrolling students into the highest qualification and then allowing for exit provisions. Experience has shown that this reduces administrative resources. It also reduces the ‘leakages’ that arise when students are required to enrol into a new course as a part of articulation.

18. Faculties are encouraged to consider using lower qualifications as enabling courses for admission into higher courses (for example, enrolling non-graduates into a Graduate Certificate and providing articulation into the Graduate Diploma for those achieving a specified grade average).
19. Four transitional issues present themselves: fees/HECS; the 50% rule; the award with distinction; credit for, and status of Honours, theses.

20. There is a lack of retrospectivity in the cancelling of any HECS debt for those completing an Honours degree and then progressing to the second year of a Master’s degree by Coursework.

21. UWA rules provide that at least 50% of any Master’s degree consist of Level 5 (or above) units. It follows that the maximum credit that can be provided for any Honours degree is 50%.

22. It should be understood that where there is articulation, the grades awarded for the Honours course will affect the grade awarded for the Master’s degree. UWA rules provide for the following:

- ‘… That the following criteria be applied for the award of Master’s with Distinction in coursework and coursework and dissertation degrees:
  i. That the student achieves a course weighted average mark (WAM) of at least 80%; and
  ii. That the weighted average mark calculation include –
     o All units attempted as part of the course that are awarded a final percentage mark; and
     o Relevant units undertaken in articulating courses of this University that are awarded a final percentage mark.’ (AC R55/10)

23. The above rules suggest that the grades awarded in the fourth year of studies would be taken into account when determining whether or not to award a Distinction.

24. In regard to credit for the coursework and thesis components of Honours degrees towards the requirements of professional Master’s degrees:

- Credit can only be given where the content of the fourth-year coursework and thesis are directly related to content of the articulating professional Master’s degree.

- If articulation is to a Master’s degree by coursework, both the coursework and thesis components attract full credit (48 points) in a 96-point degree.

- If articulation is to a Master’s degree by coursework and dissertation, both the coursework and thesis components attract full credit in a 96-point degree provided that the coursework component of the Master’s degree is at least 50% of the course.