



Third Colloquium on Learning and Teaching Support in Theology and Religious Studies. Theme: BA to MA Student Progression

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Introduction

The third PRS-LTSN Theology and Religious Studies Colloquium addressed the question:

As departments teaching Theology and Religious Studies attempt to attract an increasing number of taught postgraduate students, how can a wide range of modules be sustained with existing, or declining, resources?

In answering this question, an obvious way to achieve a balance is to integrate postgraduate students with undergraduates, especially into undergraduate modules running at level three. This is a course of action that many departments have historically followed, or are now choosing to adopt. However, justifying this practice in the face of

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines can be difficult, whilst maintaining a distinction between what constitutes Masters level work and what constitutes Bachelor level work. If the two groups are learning the same material together, to do so requires at the least additional measures and skilful clarity of definition of assessment criteria; especially if the differentiation is only made through separate learning outcomes and assessment methods.

It was clear from the responses of participants in the colloquium that a degree of stealth?from semantic through to practically applied levels?is being employed to work round this issue; mainly in the presentation of Masters programmes to prospective students and, importantly, to external evaluators (QAA) or other stakeholders. There are, however, divisions in the attitudes, approaches and concerns of teaching staff that are due, in part, to the overall character of the institutions in which they work as well as the demographics of the students that are attracted to their courses. In the absence of any real consensus, relatively few conclusions were reached, although some example models were proposed that might be useful to consider. Several participants stated they were currently in the process of revising and re-writing modules and course formats, some of these efforts being undertaken in line with the National Qualifications Framework. The colloquium was therefore a timely event that linked together professional experience and knowledge, current departmental activities and future planning in a productive, yet informal, manner.

Mode of Study and Postgraduate versus Undergraduate Numbers

The postgraduate community within Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) departments has, arguably, always been highly diverse, even prior to recent formal Widening Participation initiatives. Building upon this diversity to ensure continuing recruitment, is now the central aim that TRS departments have to address, in considering the kinds of programmes and provision they are able to offer. This is diversity not only in terms of the kind of students that Masters TRS programmes attract?varying in age range, educational and social/cultural background, motivation for continuing study, intended destination after study etc.?but also the mode of learning. For example, some departments cater predominantly for full-time postgraduate students, while others deal mainly with part-timers who are often working in fulltime jobs as well as studying.

Equally, the balance of student numbers can vary from department to department with some recruiting small numbers of postgraduate students compared with undergraduate enrolment. This raises the question whether, for the sake of efficiency and cost, it is feasible to run separate Masters level modules while there is a more complete and wide-ranging BA modular system available. It should follow that the more postgraduate students there are studying within a department, the more feasible it would be to run exclusively Masters level modules and courses. Of course, the situation is not as black and white as this, since some postgraduate students request registration for undergraduate modules to supplement the content of their programme or to access support for skills, or background information they lack and cannot obtain elsewhere from their own programme.

These practical concerns are key issues in the progression debate as they determine the amount of freedom a particular department has in constructing its taught Masters courses. For some departments an integrated model, where postgraduates and undergraduates are taught together, is an option that can be explored without undue pressure. Other departments, for a variety of reasons, may not have so much choice in determining the format their courses will take, with integration being a necessity.

The questions that remain though are, given a free choice and being unhindered by costs, time constraints, and the recommendations of bodies such as the QAA, what would departments choose to do? Are there benefits to running undergraduate and postgraduate courses together that transcend practicalities? Is integration an educationally sound practice with benefits for learners? These questions were not tackled by participants, though whether this is because it is felt that there are no benefits to shared learning of this kind is unclear; would choice always lead to distinct and separate learning for MA/BA students?

Assumptions: Who is a Masters Level Student?

Even whilst acknowledging the diversity of postgraduate TRS communities, it is evident that there are certain assumptions about what it means to be a Masters level student and it must be considered how these assumptions affect provision and learning development once an individual is enrolled upon a programme.

Eligibility for MA level is contingent upon certain factors, but the most basic of these is a first degree. Although institutions may establish grading boundaries for potential applicants, in that a 'good' honours degree is required to be considered for a postgraduate course, this need not necessarily be a real indication of ability, or indeed of suitability, for MA study. It was pointed out by several participants that, in their experience, some students enrolled on MA courses are at the same level of achievement as mediocre undergraduate students and are not fulfilling the expectations and demands of postgraduate work. The converse can also be true where high level BA students reach a level on a par with a mediocre MA student. The actual difference between the two levels can be very difficult to draw and is reliant mainly upon the achievement and output of the students.

There may be varied reasons for perceived 'failure' if students do not appear to achieve MA level quality output, ability being only one. It must also be remembered that students choosing to pursue a Masters programme in a TRS subject are not always required to have a first degree in a cognate discipline. Consequently, they have to gain ground in unfamiliar territory, because of the expectation that they acquire and refine (new) skills with which their peers are already technically adept, while simultaneously keeping up with the requirements and content of the course. These students, in effect, have to learn more than their peers who have come from a cognate background and this raises questions about how best to support these learners and ensure they become skilled as quickly as possible without abridgement of their learning to the point of detriment.

While these students may benefit from being taught with undergraduates who are still in the process of acquiring skills through their studies, socially, as a learning peer group, this may actually be an unhelpful environment where it becomes difficult not only for teachers, but also for the learners themselves to distinguish whether they are operating on a Masters, rather than a Bachelor, level.

Differentiating MA from BA Level

The differences and similarities between what constitutes MA and BA levels, as can be seen, are hard to pin down in real terms when faced with differing student abilities. Students will work to their own level and it is clear that what 'feels' like MA level to one student will feel completely different to another if assessment and achievement are viewed as relative. The colloquium focussed upon practicalities proposing that differentiation occurs in the core emphasis of the two levels of study:

Undergraduate/BA level: a focus upon 'learning to learn', the acquisition of skills and a broad knowledge of the subject area.

Postgraduate/MA level: a focus upon the application of skills and analysis, development of in-depth detailed knowledge. Participants felt that on occasion the distinction between the two levels appears almost artificial if students are integrated together, leading to concerns that a BA can 'look' like a dumbed-down version of the MA.

The MBA Model

In an attempt to clarify these assumptions and to consider the reasons why students may enrol on Masters programmes, and what defines this level over and above undergraduate degrees, the Master of Business Administration (MBA) benchmarking statement was considered. This was chosen as it is an example of one of the first transparent models tackling the issue outlined above. It is perhaps an extreme case in that both money and recruitment are generally no object for this programme, which means that 'streaming' learners according to their differing needs and abilities is a workable solution in catering for diversity.

The MBA benchmark identifies three kinds of learners:

Specialist?career entry level: candidate taking the MBA as a preparatory step. Usually recent graduates from cognate subject areas. Specialist?career development: candidate taking the MBA to further/enhance their opportunities in a field in which they are already experienced and working. Usually graduates from cognate subject areas but may have been away from learning for some time.

Generalist?career entry level: candidate taking the MBA as a preparatory step. Usually recent graduates from non-cognate subject areas.

The MBA convenors are able to create opportunities for all three types of learners to gain the experiences and outcomes that they are seeking. As consumers in the widest sense of the word, MBA students can make demands upon learning and teaching that other subject areas cannot cater for with quite the same openness and flexibility.

For TRS, as identified above, it is the Generalist types of students that pose the most difficulties, although all three types of student are apparent within MA TRS courses. TRS departments are frequently rather small in comparison to other subjects so to be able to 'stream' students throughout their course after the mode of the MBA model is impractical. There is a possibility however of streaming at the point of entry to a course and for a fixed period of time. Entry level, Induction or Foundation Skills Courses To bring these Generalist students up to the standard required of them?the leaving off point for MA level that students from cognate subject areas will be expected to commence from?the idea of induction, or foundation skills courses was considered. A number of institutions are already employing these modules to induct non-standard and, in particular, adult learners into full degree programmes. These courses are concerned with improving learners' confidence levels by equipping them with the skills to negotiate pathways through their continuing education. This ethos can be useful for the Generalist student as well; although they do not require as much emphasis upon building confidence in their ability to learn per se?they are recent graduates after all?they may need a confidence boost in being encouraged to believe that they can quickly gain the competency required to be working at the higher level.

Some undergraduate degrees now contain a 'Level Zero' component, a preliminary section prior to commencing level one studies and this may be something that could be considered for MA programmes too. The difficulty with this is that Masters courses are very brief in comparison to BA courses, so for those postgraduate students attending UK institutions from overseas on fixed term visas it may be impractical to stretch their available time by requiring attendance on additional preliminary courses; unless, of course, this component of the programme can be conducted electronically, or by correspondence prior to student arrival. This tactic also brings with it financial considerations. Students at all levels are increasingly self-funded, or reliant upon award making bodies, so to increase the duration of a course simultaneously increases tuition fees, living expenses and material/resource costs.

The colloquium considered whether these foundation courses could indeed be a prerequisite for entry onto MA programmes. One option could be that students' performance would not be assessed, attendance being an outcome in its own right. However, this does not necessarily **guarantee** that students will gain anything from simply attending, and it was felt that some proof of development would be needed. It was also queried whether a foundation course should be a requirement for **all** potential MA candidates regardless of experience or qualifications, or only for certain students who might appear to lack the background of knowledge and skills the programme demands. While some in this latter category of students may easily be discerned there are bound to be individuals who slip the net, as locating deficiencies in skills cannot always readily be determined by reading a student's application form; it is something that often only comes to light after a student has been producing work for some time and by this point a foundation module may well be over, or nearing completion. On the other hand, if all students are required to take a foundation module, very experienced candidates may well feel that they have been patronised by having to refresh themselves with skills with which they are competent.

Measurable competencies?Languages as an example

Fluency in a language, for example, is much easier to determine than many other skills; it has measurable competencies and commencement for further learning can only take place from the point of that competence. This kind of practical skill is surely legitimate for the integration of BA and MA students. Running an MA beginners course in Sanskrit, for example, is not going to differ in any substantial way from conducting a BA beginners course; initially, the acquisition of language will be the same for every beginner, although those who are experienced in other languages may well find the process much easier than some of their peers.

If this is the case, it was asked why this should not apply to other packages, with BA/MA integration being an opportunity for students to learn from a baseline, with bifurcation occurring when skills have reached the point of application, and scrutiny for assessment becomes necessary. This is the method that has very often been followed where postgraduates and undergraduates are integrated; it is by reference to a practical skill such as language competency that integrated courses appear valid.

The question that arose from this was whether there are any assessment procedures that are specifically for MA level, or that are at least more suitable at MA level than at BA level; this was left unanswered and is a point for further discussion. At this point the debate tracks back to the question of whether simply assessing MA students in a different way from BA students actually constitutes a different and ultimately higher level of learning and expectation.

The solution, or at least the justification for differentiated assessment, rests on placing output from students over and above the input that they make, or the format through which they receive their learning:

Output? must be at Level 4 (MA level)

Input? all paths are valid as long as they lead to the same place i.e. Level 4 output. This allows MA students to take un-graduate modules as part of their studies where needed or relevant.

The key words are need and relevancy where measuring skills are concerned. Although in small departments, or those with small numbers of postgraduate students, attendance on undergraduate modules is little to do with student needs but rather those of the department instead, in making their budget and provision stretch to accommodate as many students as possible.

Working with the QAA

In discussion it was clear that the colloquium participants were, by and large, happy with the integration of MA and BA students and are chiefly concerned with ensuring that students receive the best value educational package possible within departmental budgets and opportunities. However, it is the interpretation of the parameters of the QAA guidelines that appeared to be causing some confusion. The QAA requires teaching professionals, course convenors and department heads to adequately justify, evaluate and reflect upon why integration is a successful means of programme delivery that ensures MA students are working and graduating from the correct level. In some instances this produces 'fast talking' when under pressure to defend certain actions, and the participants did feel that occasionally they were being defensive when under external scrutiny.

It was felt that the QAA's stance on integration is unclear and resulted in some departments having to justify instances of integration on a case by case basis, pointing to assessments and learning outcomes as the marker of success for individual or small numbers of MA students.

A greater degree of flexibility in the QAA's approach to integration would be helpful as would an increase in the number of available module credits that MA students may take within undergraduate programmes. It would appear that teaching staff within TRS are uncertain of the extent the QAA understands and appreciates the particular circumstances of TRS and the character of the discipline as a whole, which inevitably influences the options and strategies open to departments in catering for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The feeling was that providing a quality experience using the option of integration must be predicated on the acceptance that learning at all levels is not about where a student commences from necessarily, but the point they reach, both in terms of their eventual grade, and in terms of moment at which students and their tutors feel they have 'hit their stride'. It must be asked however, whether this is a helpful attitude in light of Widening Access and Participation.

Widening Access, Widening Participation and ILPs (Individual Learning Plans)/ PDPs (Personal Development Plans)

Though it did not occur in the course of the colloquium, it is worth mentioning the impact that the Widening Access and Participation agenda can have upon the progression debate. MA programmes in TRS, as has already been stated, carry with them a natural diversity and are sites to which departments can easily add a more transparent Access/Participation aspect for recruitment purposes. It has been greatly feared that with the increasing diversity within H.E. in general widespread 'dumbing' down of degree programmes will result, something that has also already been mentioned in this article although under different circumstances.

The integration being considered here is that of combining students from two different levels of study together and it is often assumed that the same is true of students enrolled through Widening Access or Participation: that they are being integrated with the mainstream and begin at an automatic disadvantage. The tendency towards this view is inevitable in a success driven system, where success is equated with top level grades and degree classifications, and it was clear from the colloquium that there is a belief that students can and must attain a fixed standard of learning and achievement that identifies them as being correctly placed within a hierarchy of achievement levels. While this is essentially correct, especially for postgraduate degrees that are basically intended for an 'elite' (no matter how spurious a concept this may be), there is still the possibility for students who have fulfilled the fundamental requirements for entry into certain programmes to be working and achieving different levels within that programme without those who are falling toward the lower end of the grading system necessarily being deemed to be 'failing'. But why then have a grading system at all? Not all students are capable, no matter how well they apply themselves, or how well supported they are by staff, or how well served they are by the educational content of courses, of achieving top grades and so their successes must be seen as relative. On paper, a pass at distinction level for an MA is a fantastic achievement, but someone who barely scrapes past the lowest point of the pass boundary may have cause for equal celebration; the recognition of this is something that is reliant upon appraising students in context as individuals.

The integration of BA and MA students, if students are seen as contextualised individuals, can be held up as an example of equal opportunities and as sympathetic to Widening Access and Participation. An Individual Learning Programme (ILP) or Personal Development Plan (PDP) may be useful in developing this justification as a legitimate strategy for choosing integration. ILPs can be drawn up early on in an MA programme with students assisted in the identification of skill strengths and weaknesses and competencies requiring development. They can then be registered for courses that will best address these needs; the tacit acknowledgement behind this is that within a group of students there will be a broad range of abilities, and even within an individual's learning programme there will be differences in the level they are working at from subject area to subject area. This is similar in setting to the teaching of core skills in schools, where a student may be in different ability groups for different subjects with the possibility of progression once a certain level is reached. In the case of a language skill, progression may be the result of passing an examination at a certain grade. On a reading scheme it may simply be the completion of a range of books. At MA level in TRS an equivalent example would be a student who wishes to study an MA in Celtic Christianity yet knows nothing about the pre-existing Celtic religions, or the conversion of Europe and the Near East to Christianity by the Romans?if there is an undergraduate module running on this subject it would be helpful for this student to participate in it and receive credits for acquiring the knowledge and background they lacked.

In ILPs and PDPs the emphasis is upon giving the student the best opportunity for success in whatever form that may

take. This is a basic restating of the solutions and ideas already suggested by participants in the colloquium. It is another example of how creative planning and attention to wording can impact upon the debate. However, this is still only tackling need and relevancy issues, it cannot assist greatly in circumstances where postgraduates are taught with undergraduates not because it is good for them, but because that is the direction their programme takes of necessity.

Case Studies

Some participants offered examples both of mass integration and of integration on an individual basis.

The undergraduate programme offered by one TRS department commences with a foundation course at level one followed by rotating modules for the subsequent two years of the degree with level two and level three students being taught together. A greater number of modules can be offered. Assessment for the shared modules is at different levels, but is of the same type and format.

A clear distinction was made between the ability and level/status of students working in integrated courses. The latter condition is technical, even chronological, and defines groups of students from each other but is not a learning condition in the same way that ability is. Progression in level/status is not wholly reliant upon ability and achievement, ability will find its own level regardless of the technical level of students and one need not be indicative of the other. The MA programme fits round the undergraduate programme at the point where shared modules commence. There are separate modules for MA students, but those who elect to register for undergraduate courses are advised that they are entering a reading course. Attendance at lectures is not compulsory, as it is for undergraduate students, in order to ensure that MA students' learning outcomes do not appear to be reliant upon attending and participating in lectures. The information and activities available through the lecture series are seen as an enhancement or addition to their self-directed study and eventual assessment, which differs from the assessments given to undergraduate students registered for the same module. This scheme has been very successful and it has been found that, for the most part, MA students do attend the lectures. In another department an individual MA student requested registration for a level one module, which was allowed on the grounds that the student would treat it as a pedagogical case study. The assessed piece at the end of the course covered the teaching methods and considerations employed to convey a particular topic to undergraduate students with the information, knowledge and skills taught through the course being a tacit addition to the MA student's repertoire. This ensured both that the assessment was of the correct level for the student, and that they had attained suitable learning outcomes in the process.

Conclusion

It would appear that the colloquium participants are caught between wanting to preserve the integrity of a Masters degree while at the same time appreciating that practical barriers?such as inexperience and differing abilities?can mean that some students appear not to be attaining the targets that that degree level demands. While they are uncomfortable with this as academics, they are sympathetic with this as teachers and their concern lies in trying to strike a balance between the two.

For those who are involved in juggling finances, recruitment, or designing courses and modules, integration is not strictly a problem as it allows departments to offer a breadth of opportunities for students. ?Breadth is the new depth,? as one participant said. But is this really the case if creative assessment techniques drive integrated MA students to locate depth for themselves and take greater control and responsibility for their learning? MA students may end up with a greater choice of modules, but the output they produce is still reliant upon their motivation. If their motivation is good, but their ability appears to let them down, what then?

Left to their own devices, departments would continue to integrate students without undue concern. It is the prospect of evaluation and assessment of quality, in terms of teaching and standards, by external agencies such as the QAA that contributes to a think-tank of strategies for departments. Many of these are not strictly new strategies, but are

instead re-worded and re-structured versions of already established practices. This is not an underhand kind of stealth in that departments are refusing to change perfectly good systems and are finding ways to avoid doing so at all costs, but is instead a recognition that departments need to reflect on why they have structured degrees in certain ways and what students get out of it, making changes only where necessary. This kind of stealth shows management structures that are thinking ahead. It is about self-appraisal and evaluation of provision before a formal evaluating body ever sets foot in a building, which can only be a positive, if time consuming, activity.

It is clear that this is an issue that needs further discussion, and it seems certain that there will be future events addressing BA and MA progression drawing on some of the revised courses and modules on which participants are currently working. Several participants requested further guidance on working with the QAA and this will also be something that PRS-LTSN supports through this journal and the website, <http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk>.

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