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## Оптимизация системы оценивания магистерской диссертации на основе результатов бенчмаркинга

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**Аннотация.** Данная статья содержит результаты исследования, выполненного на основе бенчмаркинга критериев, используемых при оценке магистерской диссертации в Эдинбургском университете (Шотландия) и Северном (Арктическом) федеральном университете имени М. В. Ломоносова (г. Архангельск, Россия). В ходе работы было доказано наличие общих подходов к критериям оценки результатов образовательного процесса, но обнаружены различия в значимости критериев и их интерпретации. Представленные материалы могут использоваться в практике разработки международных магистерских программ для сопряжения европейских и российских подходов к оценке результатов обучения.

**Ключевые слова:** высшее образование, система качества образования, интернационализация, система оценки, бенчмаркинг

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## Optimizing assessment conception for a master's thesis through adopting the benchmarking approach

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**Abstract.** Transforming university teachers' way of thinking about assessment seems to be critical for assisting success of higher education reforms, especially when it comes to greater internationalisation of national and institutional policies. One of the critical issues for aligning strategies adopted for a master program is the need to develop critically reflective approaches to assessing a master's thesis. In this article, we present a case study of an assessment conception for a master's thesis in master's programmes delivered at Northern Arctic Federal University (NArFU)

(Arkhangelsk, Russia). The discussion is offered for two main reasons. Firstly, the case study could be of interest for other educators and programme developers who are involved in the process. Secondly, we offer a set of places to look for answers in search of promoting validity, reliability and fairness of internationally acknowledged quality of education. The results of the research may serve to inform the education policy-makers about initiatives to be taken for establishing a culture of assessment and continuous improvement within this sphere.

**Keywords:** higher education, quality assurance, internationalization, assessment, benchmarking

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## Introduction

### *The Bologna Reforms and Higher Education in Russia*

Over the past decades higher educational institutions worldwide have faced significant changes, especially those that were triggered by the broadening of their internationalisation policies. The Bologna Process (BP) which initially was thought as a provider of solutions for internal European problems has turned into the mechanism affecting the global sphere of higher education (HE). The proclamation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010<sup>1</sup> gave rise to massive research on the topics of aligning different national educational traditions and the most significant tractions of the BP-model adopted by educational systems inside and outside Europe.

Russia joined the Bologna Convention on HE in 2003 and since that time has been striving to harmonize its traditional educational setting with international models and standards. In line with the Bologna ideas from 2009 the majority of educational programmes at Russian universities were transformed into two-cycle degree programmes with ECTS and a quality assurance system<sup>2</sup>. There is reported attention to various forms of international mobility in the Federal Education Plans<sup>3</sup>. Each of these changes has caused a further redesigning and rethinking of the educational goals and content.

The practical concern for the beginning of the Bologna reforms in Russia was Russian academia's reluctance to consider bachelor's degrees as something self-sufficient and persistence in deepening the level of knowledge of those who embark on master level (MA) programmes. Some researchers were really worried by the tendency to massively consider master level programmes as the minimum acceptable ones in terms of university education. They anticipated that the unreasonably great proportion of students educated to

<sup>1</sup> *The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999. Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education*. Available at: [http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/BOLOGNA\\_DECLARATION.pdf](http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.pdf) (accessed: 03.08.2021).

<sup>2</sup> Platonova D., Semyonov D. Russia: The Institutional Landscape of Russian Higher Education. *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries*; ed. by J. Huisman, A. Smolentseva, I. Froumin. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 337–362.

<sup>3</sup> Teplyakov D., Teplyakova O. National Policy for Academic Mobility in Russia and the BRICS Countries: 20 Years of the Bologna Process Implementation. *BRICS Law Journal*, 2018, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 5–26.

MA would eventually devalue Russian master's degree<sup>1</sup>. After more than 25 years of engagement into the BP, a series of initiatives from federal institutions and the changes in socio-economic situation MS programmes have developed a more selective and focused character of being either research or professionally oriented. The plans on expansion of MA programmes have recently changed to the opposite. As a result, now we are witnessing a trend on reduction of MA programmes on offer at a particular university, which in its turn, is indicative of a highly competitive intra-university context.

Increasing the possibilities of staff and students mobility on the BP agenda was especially welcomed as a positive change in higher education. Federal Law No. 273-FZ "On Education in the Russian Federation", which entered into force on September 1, 2013, looks at the development of the education system through the establishment of obligation of the Russian Federation to promote the development of cooperation in international academic mobility of students, teachers, research scientists and other education workers. Academic mobility is also treated as a mechanism which goes in hand with diploma recognition and joint programmes with foreign universities<sup>2</sup>. Thanks to these legal regulations and successful implementation of such programmes as Erasmus, DAAD, Fulbright, Tempus and etc., academic mobility in Russia became more frequent<sup>3</sup> and started to be considered as a kind of professional standard.

Whatever the challenges Russian universities are facing now, the ongoing BP call for enhancement and a closer scrutiny of the frameworks underpinning MA programmes and a search for best aligning practices.

#### *Aligning Process in MA Programmes*

MA programmes at Russian universities are accessible for those who have completed either a Specialist or a Bachelor programme. They last for two years and consist of taught modules and a master's thesis with the total of 120 credits. The teaching experience is generally considered to be more theoretical in the Russian context as compared to the European one. The provision of a full-fledged experience for students both in Europe and Russia requires the setting of clearly formulated learning objectives.

Here it is worth mentioning the Tuning Educational Structures initiative<sup>4</sup>. The Tuning methodology is in line with the BP and constitutes one of the academic tools to promote compatible and comparable educational programmes that could support students' academic mobility. The task was considered feasible on the basis of generic and subject-specific

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell P. J., Mitchell L. A. Implementation of the Bologna Process and Language Education in Russia. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2014, vol. 154, pp. 170–174.

<sup>2</sup> The Federal Law of the Russian Federation of December 29, 2012 No. 273 "On Education in the Russian Federation" (with the amendments entering into force on 01.09.2020). Available at: <https://goo.su/ffg> (accessed: 03.08.2021).

<sup>3</sup> Rostovskaya T. K., Maksimova A. S., Mekeko N. M., Fomina S. N. Barriers to Students' Academic Mobility in Russia. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 2020, vol. 8, iss. 4, pp. 1218–1227.

<sup>4</sup> *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. Final Report. Phase One*; ed. by J. Conzáles, R. Wagenaar. Bilbao: University of Deusto, 2003. Available at: [http://tuningacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TuningEUI\\_Final-Report\\_EN.pdf](http://tuningacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TuningEUI_Final-Report_EN.pdf) (accessed: 03.08.2021).

competences used in designing and developing higher education degree programmes. The development of reference points in several subject areas has contributed to aligning degree outcomes, thus, making the programmes more transparent. Although Tuning operates globally, all its projects are regionally based to do justice to cultural and other differences<sup>1</sup>.

Graduate competency in Russian MA programmes is prescribed by Federal State Educational Standards for Higher Education (MA level) and encompasses key (general), generic professional and professional (core and non-core) competences. The key (general) competencies are common to all master level programmes. Major universities have the authority to establish their own educational standards on the basis of existing governmental regulations. Students' progression is subject to local university regulations, which contain a common marking scheme and specified assessment criteria employed by the universities.

In order to maintain a high level of quality assurance and international acknowledgment MA programmes in Russia can undergo the procedure of international evaluation (accreditation). Yet, most study programmes are seldom exposed to this kind of external evaluation.

The introduction of learning outcomes alone cannot ensure the quality of education, as it is vital to align it with assessment strategies. Even though the competencies are now assigned to programmes and courses, their formulations are not always interpreted in the same way which makes it difficult to judge whether the skills and qualities have been acquired by the students<sup>2</sup>. Thus, there is an urgent need to put a greater focus on assessment conceptions implemented in MA programmes.

#### *The Potential of Benchmarking for Assessment Conceptions*

In response to higher education trends educators have become committed to making assessment of student productions more effective and less mysterious. Pressed by the need to integrate into an international education context Russian universities are looking to international benchmarking to underpin improvements of assessment conceptions. Many universities rely on their foreign partners for effective benchmarking data to prompt the changes and drive the improvement in this sphere. Considering benchmarking as a tool for improvement achieved through comparison with the practices of other universities the programmes can benefit in different ways, ranging from performance to generic perspectives<sup>3</sup>. Yet we have to be aware that one cannot just pick up the practice of the other institution, but has to adapt it to the existing framework.

Prior to the description of the typical framework for a MS thesis as an element of the programme, it is important to note the change in interpreting assessment and feedback that

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<sup>1</sup> Tuning Russia. *Na puti k sopostavimosti programm vysshego obrazovaniia. Informatsionnyi obzor* [Towards comparability of higher education programmes. Information review; ed. by I. Diukarev et al.]. Bilbao: Deusto University Press, 2013. Available at: <http://tuningacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/RUSO-Information-Review-Tuning-Rusia-DIG.pdf> (accessed: 03.08.2021).

<sup>2</sup> Getha-Taylor H., Hummert R., Nalbandian J., Silvia C. Competency Model Design and Assessment: Findings and Future Directions. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 2013, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 141–171.

<sup>3</sup> Bhutta K. S., Huq F. Benchmarking – best practices: an integrative approach. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 1999, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 254–268.

happened in the early 2010s and was reported by western researchers<sup>1</sup>. The change consisted in understanding assessment as a process where students have an active role to play. In the Russian context it is especially observable in the fact that when students are required to choose the subject matter of their master's thesis, they do not select from a prescribed list. Individual topics are negotiated and agreed with the scientific supervisor and most students use either their own research interest or professional context as a starting point.

While in Europe and the USA master's thesis is commonly considered as a written type of assignment, in Russia more emphasis is placed on its public proving. Proving a thesis is held in the presence of the Examination Board which includes programme members and external members representing employers. The chair is an external member. The examination normally starts with the student's presentation of the purpose and findings of the thesis, followed by a discussion. Other persons present also have a right to take part in it. Thus, assessment of a master's thesis encompasses both the consideration of it as a written product and an oral production in the form of presentation. The written product undergoes reviewing, which is an element of external evaluation conducted by a specialist from the study field, having no involvement with the scientific supervisor's department. The reviewer is invited to participate in the thesis proving or can just provide a written review to the Examination Board. Consequently, the members of the Examination Board are to rely on their judgement about the quality of the master's thesis (treated both as a written and as an oral production) and the opinion expressed by the reviewer. The scientific supervisor is responsible for the decision on the admission of the student to the thesis examination procedure and presents a general characteristic of the student's competence as a researcher.

Thus, as is assumed by both researchers and practitioners, assessment criteria should be useful to at least three groups of stakeholders: for the university staff who develop and assess the thesis, for the students, and for the employers (or any external stakeholder)<sup>2</sup>. To make them serve to facilitate the reliability and the fairness of assessment remains a challenging task.

The paper is organized as follows: after considering the influence of international initiatives on the developments in higher education in Russia and positing the importance of revisiting assessment conceptions for a master's thesis in the light of the ongoing alignment practices, we concentrate on the research methodology and introduce the educational context for our enquiry. Research results are reported in a separate section, followed by a discussion. Finally, limitations, conclusions and implications are presented.

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<sup>1</sup> Dawson P., Henderson M., Mahoney P., Phillips M., Ryan T., Boud D., Molloy E. What makes for effective feedback: staff and students perspectives. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 2019, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 25–36.

<sup>2</sup> Wharton S. Defining appropriate criteria for the assessment of Master's level TESOL assignments. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 2003, vol. 28, no. 6, pp. 649–663.

## **The main part**

### **Materials and methods**

Considering assessment as a key element in the teaching and learning process which enables critical judgement about outcomes, we intended to explore to what extent the academics from different universities would share the same opinion in judging the quality of the master's thesis.

As a starting point, we took the assessment criteria and descriptors for any written assignment, which were used by our partner university (Edinburgh University) in the TESOL Master's programme (2018). The choice of the programme was prompted by the existing cooperation between the partner universities in the form of academic staff mobility and the application of benchmarking strategies in the realization of NArFU's Master's programme in Teaching English as a Foreign Language which underwent international accreditation procedure in 2016. The research question was as follows: in case the NArFU academics assess the master's thesis according to the assessment criteria and descriptors of Edinburgh University, will the assessment results correlate with the grading system of Edinburgh University.

The data collection was carried out in winter semester of 2020–2021 academic years. The study participants comprised 12 academics from different departments of NArFU who had already had an experience in assessing a master's thesis. Qualitative data were collected through the SurveyMonkey survey. A questionnaire was employed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data on academics' understanding of learning outcomes and their interpretations of the criteria and descriptors for the assessment of a master's thesis. The questionnaire was anonymous and completion was voluntary. The respondents could answer either all or only some of the questions.

In order to involve NArFU academics in sharing their ideas of the appropriate standards for fair and transparent assessment, we first introduced them to the generic rubrics of assessment criteria used in Edinburgh University and asked their opinion on their applicability for the assessment of a master's thesis:

(Q.1). Do you agree that all these criteria are applicable for the assessment of the master's thesis?

Then we asked them to rank the importance of those criteria:

(Q.2). Rank the importance of these criteria.

The following 6 questions of the questionnaire dealt with the academics' interpretations of the provided descriptors for each of the rubrics to find how they correlate with the grading system of Edinburgh University. For matching their choices, the respondents were also provided with the grading scale of Edinburgh University, comprising Distinction (70 %–100 %); Merit (60 %–69 %); Pass (50 %–59 %); Pass (40 %–49 %); Fail (30 %–39 %).

(Q.3). Do you agree that if the thesis meets the following descriptors it can be given a Pass mark (Knowledge and Understanding of Concepts criteria)?

(Q.4). According to the Knowledge and Use of Literature criteria (2) which indicators meet the requirements of a Pass mark?

(Q.5). According to the Critical Reflection on Theory and Practice criteria how would

you assess the work if it meets the following descriptors?

(Q.6). According to Application of Theory to Practice criteria how would you assess the work if it meets the following descriptors?

(Q.7). Which of the listed descriptors (1) meets the Merit level for the Academic Discourse criteria?

(Q.8). How would you assess the work if it meets the following descriptors according to Planning and Implementation of the Research criteria?

### Results

This section represents the core findings of the survey based on the benchmarking approach aiming to compare assessment strategies applied by NArFU and Edinburg University to a master's thesis.

The first question (Q.1) involved benchmarking of assessment criteria applied at both universities. 100 % of survey participants from NArFU agreed that all 6 criteria employed at Edinburgh University (knowledge and understanding of concepts; knowledge and use of literature; critical reflection on theory and practice; application of theory and practice; constructing academic discourse; planning and implementation of the research / investigation) are applicable for the assessment of the master's thesis in NArFU.

The second question (Q.2) asked the respondents to rank the assessment criteria according to their importance. The idea was to find out general assessment principles used by NArFU lecturers when assessing research papers.

Table 1 shows the ranking results of the assessment criteria according to their importance in the process of assessing research papers by Russian university teachers.

Five participants (45.5 %) and four participants (36.36 %) ranked Critical Reflection on Theory and Practice as the second and third important criteria for assessment, so finally it got the highest index (4.36). Planning and Implementing of the Research got the second highest index (4.30). Knowledge and Understanding of Concepts with index 4.09 entered the top three. 60 % of the respondents rated Constructing Academic Discourse criterion as the least important in the assessment process (index 1.5). Equal number of participants (4) ranked the criteria Knowledge and Understanding of Concepts and Application of Theory and Practice as the top ones.

Table 1

**Assessment criteria ranking results according to their importance**

| Criterion                                 | 1            | 2            | 3            | 4            | 5            | 6            | Total | Score |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------|-------|
| Planning and implementing of the research | 10.00 %<br>1 | 30.00 %<br>3 | 50.00 %<br>5 | 0.00 %<br>0  | 10.00 %<br>1 | 0.00 %<br>0  | 10    | 4.30  |
| Constructing academic discourse           | 0.00 %<br>0  | 0.00 %<br>0  | 0.00 %<br>0  | 10.00 %<br>1 | 30.00 %<br>3 | 60.00 %<br>6 | 10    | 1.50  |
| Application of theory and practice        | 33.33 %<br>4 | 8.33 %<br>1  | 8.33 %<br>1  | 25.00 %<br>3 | 16.67 %<br>2 | 8.33 %<br>1  | 12    | 3.92  |

*Continuation of table 1*

|                                            |              |              |              |              |              |              |    |      |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----|------|
| Critical reflection on theory and practice | 9.09 %<br>1  | 45.45 %<br>5 | 36.36 %<br>4 | 0.00 %<br>0  | 0.00 %<br>0  | 9.09 %<br>1  | 11 | 4.36 |
| Knowledge and use of literature            | 0.00 %<br>0  | 0.00 %<br>0  | 0.00 %<br>0  | 30.00 %<br>3 | 40.00 %<br>4 | 30.00 %<br>3 | 10 | 2.00 |
| Knowledge and understanding concepts       | 36.36 %<br>4 | 9.09 %<br>1  | 0.00 %<br>0  | 36.36 %<br>4 | 18.18 %<br>2 | 0.00 %<br>0  | 11 | 4.09 |

Questions 3 and 4 focused on benchmarking of assessment standards for a Pass mark.

Responses to the third question (Q.3) “Do you agree that if the thesis meets the following descriptors it can be given a Pass mark (Knowledge and Understanding of Concepts criteria)?” included 41.67 % positive answers and 58.33 % negative replies, which shows that most Russian teachers applied the same standards as accepted in Edinburgh University.

Table 2 presents responses to the forth question (Q.4) “According to the Knowledge and Use of Literature criteria which indicators meet the requirements of a Pass mark?” and demonstrates that only 27.27 % of respondents failed to determine the indicators for a Pass mark.

*Table 2*

#### Responses to question 4

| Criterion descriptors                                                                                                                                                                          | Responses    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| The use of literature may not take a chronological order into account. and the work selectively picks the citations that are used without much thought of their place in the original argument | 81.82 %<br>9 |
| The work uses some unsystematic sources. e.g. from other fields that are irrelevant to the topic                                                                                               | 45.45 %<br>5 |
| Stand-alone quotes from sources are used but without further commentary                                                                                                                        | 27.27 %<br>3 |
| Total respondents                                                                                                                                                                              | 11           |

The seventh question (Q.7) was “Which of the listed descriptors (1) meets the Merit level for the Academic Discourse criterion?” The question contained three descriptors of Honor, Merit and Pass levels. Most of the respondents (58.33 %) determined the indicator that meets the Merit level for the Academic Discourse criterion (There are small inconsistencies in the referencing system that is used, but it still communicates to peers). Still 33 % of respondents referred to a higher level, and 8 % to lower level of assessment.

Questions (Q.5), (Q.6) and (Q.8) were designed to compare the grading standards Russian university lecturers apply to assess the master’s thesis to the benchmarks (standards of Edinburgh University).

As Table 3 shows according to the Critical reflection on theory and practice and

Application of theory and practice criteria half of the respondents gave a Pass mark to the work, which meets the standards of Edinburg University.

41.67 % of respondents assessed the indicators for Planning and Implementation of the Research criterion lower than recommended giving the work a Fail mark E (30–39 %) though according to the assessment system of Edinburgh University the work would get a Pass mark D (40–49 %). Only 25 % of our respondents gave the appropriate rating. Still if we add up two Pass levels (C+D) we can see that assessment results distributed as 50/50 that means that equal number of respondents assessed the work as passed or failed.

Table 3

Assessment results according to the criteria descriptors

| Criterion                                                          | Distinction<br>(70 %–100 %) | Merit<br>(60 %–69 %) | Pass<br>(50 %–59 %) | Pass<br>(40 %–49 %) | Fail<br>(30 %–39 %) | Total number<br>of<br>respondents |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Critical<br>Reflection<br>on Theory<br>and<br>Practice<br>(Q.5)    | 8.33 %<br>1                 | 8.33 %<br>1          | 33.33 %<br>4        | 50.00 %<br>6        | 0.00 %<br>0         | 12                                |
| Application<br>of Theory<br>to Practice<br>(Q.6)                   | 8.33 %<br>1                 | 8.33 %<br>1          | 33.33 %<br>4        | 50.00 %<br>6        | 0.00 %<br>0         | 12                                |
| Planning<br>and<br>Implemen-<br>tation of the<br>Research<br>(Q.8) | 8.33 %<br>1                 | 8.33 %<br>1          | 16.67 %<br>2        | 25.00 %<br>3        | 41.67 %<br>5        | 12                                |

## Discussion

The questionnaire results illustrated many similarities reported by respondents across the assessment principles used in both universities; however, some differences were noted as well. For example, though all the respondents considered the rubrics of assessment criteria applicable for grading the master's thesis, they marked critical reflection on theory and practice as more important than any other criteria. This could be due to fact that Russian academics are aware of the students' need for making critical connections between the content of the study programme and real life experiences. It is a crucial factor for many employers as well who don't seem to be fully satisfied with how universities prepare graduates for the workplace. This concern is felt worldwide as a 'gap' between the skills and attitudes of graduates, and the requirements of the work environment in a mobile and

globalised society<sup>1</sup>. Critical reflection is seen as one of the soft skills which demonstrates the students' personal involvement in problem-solving and the originality of their ideas.

Additional to getting graduates to think critically in a scientific way it is not less important to help them use research methods in their professional life. Unsurprisingly, planning and implementing the research rubric has scored second in the rating, which is indicative of the academics' concern for the research-based scientific development for professional practice. They see the purpose of a master's thesis as part of the goal to form graduates with the understanding of research in its relation to real-life practices.

The answers to questions (Q.3–Q.8) dealing with the interpretations of the descriptors used to match the assessment decisions with the grading system of Edinburgh University have revealed that NArFU academics, in general, had little difficulty in applying them. Even though it is not traditional for NArFU to have such descriptors as the criteria of any final assessment are formulated very broadly and are designed by the department of Academic Development. The academic staff is mainly responsible for the discussion of the number of points, which the students can score for each of the criteria, not the criteria themselves.

Taking into account that the starting point for the pass at Russian Universities is higher (51 %) as compared to Edinburgh University standards (40 %), NArFU academics have shown similar assessment decisions on the quality of the thesis in the majority of the cases. The only notable case is the discrepancy of opinions in the grading of planning and implementation of the research (Q.8), where equal number of the respondents assessed the work as passed or failed. As it has been stated earlier in the paper, the feasibility of research questions, the way the findings inform the aims of the research and their relation to real-life practices is valued high by the majority of the respondents, thus, making it harder to agree on the minimal requirements for a pass grade.

It is also evident that there is always room for highly individualised judgements constituting a small percentage of responses, which could be explained by some conscious or subconscious adjustments to personal standards of the academics, which they acquire in their previous personal experience in grading students' works. In part, it could also be indicative of the lack of academics' experience in applying international frameworks for assessment of students' works.

The evidence collated during the research suggests, at least, two approaches that could be adopted by NArFU's administration to improve the university assessment policy. Firstly, we need a better formulated assessment strategy which will encompass both assessment criteria and descriptors. It is vital to make not only students, but academics as well assessment motivated via addressing their concern of clarity and fairness of assessment, which is sensitive to the current national and international tendencies. Secondly, it is important to maintain and develop closer linkages between partner universities. Closer links could contribute to better information sharing, academic staff and students' mobility, creating the necessary conditions for paradigm crossing in the assessment system.

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<sup>1</sup> King Z. New or traditional careers? A study of UK graduates' preferences. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 2003, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 5–26.

## Conclusions

This was a small-scale study that investigated a particular case of one of the federal universities in Russia. By its nature it cannot claim to be representative of the entire higher education sector. Although the scope of the study was limited, it did begin to address, as yet, under explored and documented issue of how academic staff engaged with master's thesis grading is prepared to see beyond the national framework of assessment.

The results of the study imply that, whilst the ongoing processes of internationalisation encouraging sharing of standards between the institutions may help aligning assessment decisions, they remain complex and intuitive, thus making variability of assessment inevitable. Yet, sometimes even minor changes can cause major consequences to inform assessment decisions; for instance, the introduction of transparent descriptors and enhancing the university policies in the field of quality assurance. It is important to help academics formulate the applied standards of assessment not only with reference to their accumulated field knowledge and skills as well as recollections of having had their own works graded but also in accordance with the current international tendencies.

As long as assessment reform remains a feature of the education systems across the world, there will always be the need to better understand the decision-making process in the field of grading to make it more transparent, reliable and fair. It is hoped that our research has contributed to that as well.

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